

# Contents

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SPECIAL ISSUE • Banis of Bharatanatyam and Recent Trends

Nataraja Darshan		
Vadivelu and Vazhuvoor Centenaries	- A. Seshan	11
The Pandanallur Style	- Alarmel Valli	17
Kattumannarkoil	- Ashish Khokar	23
Vazhuvoor Bani	- Kamala Lakshminarayanan	29
Thanjavur Bani		
Thanjavur Bani of Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir	- Guru K. Kalyanasundaram and other gurus based on interviews by Jyothi Mohan	35
Understanding Thanjavur Bani through Guru Kittappa	- Dr. Sucheta Bhide Chapekar	41
Dandayudhapani Pillai Bani	- Jayalakshmi Alva in conversation with Jyothi Mohan ... - Urmila Sathyanarayanan	47 49
The Bala Legacy	- Nandini Ramani	53
Kalakshetra Bani	- Leela Samson	59
Mysore Bani	- Lalitha Srinivasan	65
Bharata Nrityam	- Dr. Jayashree Rajagopalan	71
Teaching Bharatanatyam in Institutions	- Jyothi Mohan	77
Teaching Bharatanatyam Abroad	- Rajyashree Ramesh	81
Group Choreography	- B. Bhanumati	87
Dance Drama	- V. P. Dhananjayan	93
The Many Layers of India's Modern Dance	- Anita Ratnam	99
Music for Bharatanatyam	- Rajee Narayan	105
Dance Criticism	- Subadra Murthy	109
A Unique Journal	- Book Review by A. Seshan	113
70 years of Indian Classical Dances	- Report by Jyothi Mohan	117
Sabha Roundup	- Report by Nalini Dinesh, A. Seshan & Jyothi Mohan	121
Happenings at the Vidyalaya	- Report by Nalini Dinesh	126

Cover Image: Dancing Shiva, Gangaikondacholapuram • Back Cover: Nattalakschmi from the Hoysala temple (Chennakesava temple) at Somnathpur, Karnataka • Photograph Credits: Lalitha Venkat

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## In Focus

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. The name of each bani carries a characteristic hue and exudes a distinct fragrance.

When Mr. A. Seshan suggested that Shanmukha bring out a special commemorative issue on Banis, we were wondering whether we were stirring a hornet's nest! Contrary to our misgivings, it has been a wonderful journey over the last few months. We sent out letters to the proponents of each bani and were very pleasantly surprised to see the prompt and enthusiastic response. Despite their hectic schedule, they took time off to go through our guidelines and talk freely about their gurus with great love and respect. To commemorate the bicentennial of Vadivelu, youngest of the Thanjavur Quartet as well as the centenary year of Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai we dedicate this issue to these trail-blazers. A. Seshan pays a tribute to them and Vazhuvoor in his article *Vadivelu and Vazhuvoor Centenaries*. Alamel Valli, the prime performer of the Pandanallur bani talks about her memorable experiences while learning from her gurus Chokkalingam Pillai and Subbaraya Pillai. Ashish Mohan Khokar writes about the *Kattumannar Koil bani* which his mother M. K. Saroja popularised. We were delighted when the legendary Kamala, exponent of the *Vazhuvoor bani* contributed her perception of her renowned bani. Guru Kalyanasundaram and members of his family trace the history and lineage of the illustrious *Thanjavur Bani of Kuppiyah Pillai*. He pointed out that all successive generations of the

inheritors of this bani have been propagating it and keeping it alive. Dr. Sucheta Bhide Chapekar writes about her *Understanding of Thanjavur Bani through Kittappa Pillai*. Fortunately for us, Jayalakshmi Alva, foremost disciple of K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai happened to visit our Vidyalaya to give a lec-dem on the bani. Despite the late hour after the lec-dem, she spoke about the bani of her mentor going back in time, with great enthusiasm. Urmila Satyanarayanan shares her impressions as a young girl, of the same bani. Nandini Ramani writes about the distinguished *Bala Legacy* emphasising on the lesser known aspects of nritya in the bani. Leela Samson, despite her preoccupation with administration of Kalakshetra as well as the Sangeet Natak Akademi, contributed a beautiful article on her mentor and the *Kalakshetra bani*. Lalitha Srinivasan's article on the *Mysore Bani* gives us an insight into the different kinds of compositions typical to the bani. Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam has been in the news from the time the idea of the Rajarajeswaram 1000 was conceived by her. Talking about her and her style *Bharata Nrityam* is her prime disciple Dr. Jayashree Rajagopalan. Jyothi Mohan discusses *Teaching Bharatanatyam in Institutions* as opposed to one on one as in the guru-shishya parampara. Rajyashree Ramesh who is based in Berlin talks of the challenges of *Teaching Bharatanatyam Abroad*. B. Bhanumati explains the infinite

possibilities of making a group dance performance, an aesthetic expression in her article on *Group Choreography*. "Tracing the history of the *Dance Drama* tradition and explaining what its production entails, is V.P. Dhananjayan's contribution. Contemporary dance has its origins in classical dance. Hence we invited Anita Ratnam to write about the *Many Layers of India's Modern Dance*. Music and dance go hand in hand. We felt an article on *Music for Bharatanatyam* would be a subject for Guru Rajee Narayan to elaborate upon, as it is a subject close to her heart. Many know that she has written and composed several songs for dance. Criticism can make or mar the career of an artiste. Media plays a crucial role in publicising an artiste's creative output. Subadra Murthy exhorts dancers to turn their attention to writing reviews as they are well-informed about the art form and in a better position to write about performances. Her article is an eye-opener for those who are interested and have a flair for writing. Mr. Seshan's *Book Review of "Attendance"*, the unique annual publication describes the painstaking effort of editor Ashish Mohan Khokar, who is an archivist and historian of repute.

Old stalwarts, who by their stellar performances proved they are more than a match for the young dancers of today, delighted the fully packed hall.

The occasion was stock-taking of what had happened in 70 years of *Classical Dance*, a National Seminar organised by of Nalanda Dance Research Centre, at Juhu, Mumbai. The exhilaration experienced by Jyothi Mohan who attended the 3-day seminar is vividly brought out in her report.

Shanmukhananda Sabha features performances of well-known as well as talented upcoming artistes. The *Sabha Roundup* features reviews by A. Seshan, Nalini Dinesh and Jyothi Mohan. *Happenings at the Vidyalaya* sums up the cultural activities at the Shanmukhananda Bharatiya Sangeetha Vidyalaya as reported and reviewed by Nalini Dinesh. This has been a labour of love by all those who contributed to it. We are immensely grateful to Mr. A. Seshan for his meticulous planning of this issue. His expertise and experience has been an invaluable contribution in bringing it out. We specially thank Lalitha Venkat, editor of *narthaki.com* for enthusiastically sharing exquisite photographs of Nataraja clicked by her. We are also grateful to *Nartanam* for helping us with photographs.

This issue therefore, is like one big Indian wedding with everybody coming together, sharing their ideas and enjoying being a part of this effort to document the various banis for posterity. We hope this volume will be cherished by readers as a collector's item.





Gopuram figure in Thiruvallankadu

Courtesy: Lalitha Venkat



Iravateswara, Temple - Darasuram

Courtesy: Lalitha Venkat





Brihadeeswara temple in Thanjavur

Credits: Lalitha Venkat



Nataraja sculpture in the Art Gallery of Madurai, Meenakshi Amman Temple

Coutesy: S. Meenakshi Sundaram, Madurai

Dedicated to  
The Tanjore Quartet



**Chinniah**  
(1802-1856)



**Ponniah**  
(1804-1864)



**Sivanandam**  
(1808-1863)



**Vadivelu**  
(1810-1845)

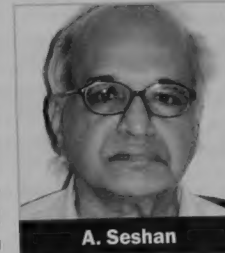


**Vazhuvoor Ramalah Pillai**  
(1910-1979)

## Vadivelu and Vazhuvoorar Centenaries<sup>1</sup>

- A. Seshan

**B**haratanatyam (BN) owes its present stature to the Tanjore Quartet (Thanjai Naalvar in Tamil) who systematised the existing Sadir and evolved the Margam (the Alarippu to Tillana format) paving the way for sound training and performance on the stage in a graded and structured manner from the simple to the complex that provides for variety and diversity. They laid the foundation for systematic training by codifying the adavus, i.e., the basic dance steps. They did to BN what later Ariyakudi did to Carnatic music. The brothers Chinnayya (1802-1856), Ponniah (1804-1864), Sivanandam (1808-1863) and Vadivelu (1810-1845) contributed richly not only to BN but also to Carnatic music. They composed a large number of varnams and kritis, including the *Navaratnamala*, a tribute to their guru. They were the direct disciples of no less a vaggeyakara than Muthuswami Dikshitar, one of the Carnatic music trinity. Dikshitar called Vadivelu as an *ekasandhagrahi* - one who has the ability to reproduce a song after hearing it only once. The Quartet's jatiswaram compositions have evoked admiration from the cognoscenti. Tyagaraja was impressed by their Todi when the brothers were conducting "*Daanike*". Vadivelu introduced and popularised violin in Carnatic music concerts along with Baluswami Dikshitar. He also assisted Swati Tirunal in popularising Mohiniyattam providing opportunities to women dancers. Until then Kathakali, the male preserve, dominated the dance scene in Kerala. The bicentennial of his



**A. Seshan**

birth falls in this year. We have already missed the birth bicentennials of his three elder brothers. This is not surprising since Margam itself is being forgotten. The country should utilize the opportunity to observe this and the next year in memory of all the members of the Quartet.

What is disturbing in the BN scene today is the slow death of Margam evolved by the Quartet introducing nritya and nritya, including abhinaya in a structured manner to make the transition from one to the other easy and smooth for the artiste and the viewer alike. It was the standard fare offered by dancers till about the third quarter of the last century after its great revival in the earlier quarter. Its heyday was reached during the twenty five years after Independence when great gurus like Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, Kattumannarkoil Muthukumara Pillai, Tiruvidaimarudur Kuppaiah Pillai and Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai strode the field like giants and groomed many students who later became international stars. Think of the days when Vazhuvoorar recited jatis in his leonine voice and Kittappa Pillai sang jatiswarams melodiously. The climax was reached when, under the nattuvangam of Vazhuvoorar, Anandhi and Radha danced and MS Subbulakshmi joined the team to sing padams for abhinayam. As a sample of those glorious days I give below the unbelievable contents of a BN performance by Anandhi and Radha at the Indian Gymkhana grounds on the then Brahmanwada Road, near King's

<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly expanded version of an article, which appeared in *narthaki.com* on March 12, 2010. The consent of its editor to reproduce the material is thankfully acknowledged.



Margam		Anandhi & Radha
Jatishwaram	Yadukulakambodhi	Radha
Varnam	Sankarabharanam	Anandhi & Radha
<b>Interval</b>		
Yeththanai Sollalium	Saveri	Anandhi
Taye Yasoda	Todi	Radha
Yen Pallikondir	Mohanam	Anandhi
Yaro Ivar Yaro	Bhairavi	Radha
Thirupavai/Vandana	Khamas	Anandhi
Kalaittookki	Yadukulakambodhi	Radha
Thiruvalluvar	Khamas	Anandhi & Radha
<b>Interval</b>		
Ghana Shyama	Ragamalikai	Radha
Malaippozhudhinile	Ragamalikai	Anandhi & Radha
Agalavallam	Mand (not given in the source)	Anandhi & Radha
Natanam Adinar	Vasantham	Anandhi & Radha
	Mangalam	

(Source: Programme brochure on <http://www.msstribute.org/pageflip/arangetram.html>)

Circle in Matunga, Bombay (as it was then called). It was in aid of the Gymkhana Building Fund held on April 4, 1947. Vazhuvoor was the conductor and MS joined to sing padams for abhinayam.

All the seven songs between the two intervals are mentioned as padams in the programme brochure and were obviously sung by MS. (Note the absence of a javali.) The performance started at 8 p.m. and one does not know when it ended. There were two intervals. What a sumptuous fare was offered to rasikas! Think also of the value one got for money in those days by paying what would look today as a small price for an admission ticket. It is unfortunate that we did not have the facility of videotaping the event. Not only the old timers but even the younger generation of dancers and rasikas will wonder whether those golden days will ever return.

There were contemporaneous new trends also like the dance productions of Kalakshetra which, however, preserved the basic grammar of the traditional format in spirit. There were thematic dances like the Kuravanji and fusion, the

latter attempted by Uday Shankar. However, all these attempts were on a limited scale. Margam continued to be the bread and butter of most of the topnotchers in the field. But in recent years it has gone into the background with fewer and fewer dancers giving attention to it and the leading lights of the profession taking to thematic dancing, fusion and modern dance. (See the article on "Neo-Classical and Modern Dancing and Margam in Bharatanatyam" in <http://www.narthaki.com/info/articles/art262.html>). Aficionados of the dance form are not sure whether Margam would survive after a decade if the five-star dancers cut themselves away from their roots. One reason given by the latter is that the audiences have no patience or time to go through a three-hour recital on traditional lines. This is, however, belied by the splendid response to Margam-based programmes this writer has observed at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Mumbai in recent times. Not only were the large halls (with 1000 seats) filled to the full there were also cases of those without advance booking for the smaller auditoria (200-

300 seats) being turned back. I feel the real reason for the decline may be that the average artiste does not have either the passion, or the patience, or the physical stamina to traverse the path of Margam. She (includes he also!) can no longer dance a varnam for an hour with dripping sweat and panting breath even in air-conditioned halls. This is because of the poor conditioning of the body. Reputed gurus and institutions teaching BN, Kathakali, etc., have always emphasised physical fitness as a prerequisite for a professional dancer and have incorporated exercises like yogasanas in their curricula.

I remember reading somewhere that Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, nattuvanar nonpareil, was born in 1910. But I tried for several months without success accessing websites, dancers and others to get the authentic information on his date of birth. Eventually I discovered two dates. One was in March (no date), according to Sangeet Natak Akademi. The other from a music and dance magazine was December 24, 1910. In any case the consensus seems to be that he was born in 1910. Thus this year marks the birth centenary of Vazhuvoor also besides the bicentennial of Vadivelu. Arguably, according to some experts, it was Vazhuvoor who gave the nattuvanar and the other accompanists a place of importance by seating them on the side of the stage. Till then they used to move behind the dancer in Sadir. He also introduced the practice of the dancer entering the stage from the side wing in a dramatic way, as exemplified best by Kamala, instead of walking casually to the centre to start the programme. These are, of course, minor details. He blazed a new trail making BN more popular through his own bani and the media of movies. His style needs a full-fledged article to discuss<sup>2</sup>. The sculptural poses in Tillana were conceived by him and they are now

standard fare in all the schools of BN. It is a happy coincidence that the Vadivelu bicentennial and the Vazhuvoor centenary fall in the same year making it a double delight to celebrate. Generally centennial years are observed through one year. So it is appropriate to celebrate the twin centenaries during 2010-11.

Sangeet Natak Akademi (Central and regional) and Indian cultural institutions here and abroad should observe both the landmark occasions together. In particular, those Chennai sabhas that have missed the event in 2010 should keep this in mind for the December music and dance festival in 2011. They should arrange for concerts of all the banis of BN, based on Margam. In fact 2010-11 should be declared as the 'Year of the Margam' in the BN world. Besides providing a stimulus to its revival without any detriment to the other experiments currently going on it would also restore the nattuvanar to his rightful place of importance on the stage. (See "The Rise and Fall of the Nattuvanar" in <http://www.narthaki.com/info/articles/art234.html>). In Tamil Nadu, which can take credit for the birth of BN, if the Chief Minister agrees to head the Celebration Committee despite his busy life, it would give a great boost to the occasion and emphasise its importance. The event may be called "Bharatanattiya Marabunerit Tiruvizha" in Tamil Nadu and "Margam Mahotsav" elsewhere. (Marabu = tradition or convention, Neri = path and Tiruvizha = great festival. The "t" after Marabunerit provides the sandhi link required by grammar.) In Tamil Nadu it should be celebrated with at least one programme based on Margam in every district headquarters with live orchestra (not recorded music) when local artistes besides the established ones may be given chances to perform. Opportunities may be given to the different schools of BN besides Vazhuvoor. Ideally the items in

<sup>2</sup> Kamala Lakshminarayanan's article on Vazhuvoor bani appears elsewhere in the issue.

the programmes should be compositions of the Quartet and Vazhuvoor. It will be a unique and valuable opportunity to rediscover some of the forgotten gems of the BN repertoire. I remember how a few of Syama Sastri's rarely-heard kritis were found during the bicentennial celebration of his birth in 1962. D. K. Pattammal gave a concert on May 5, 1962 in Tiruvarur that was relayed in the National Programme of Akashvani. She sang such songs as "Dayanidhe" (a Begada varnam), "Devi Brova" (the only song in Chintamani) and

"Tarunam Edamma" (in Gaulipantu, arguably the only Tamil song of the vaggeyakara). Subsequently they became popular on the concert circuit. The celebration of vaggeyakaras' days thus serves a useful purpose. Seminars may be organised to discuss the role of Margam, trends in BN, training (including physical exercises), dance therapy, choreography, etc., and future directions to draw a roadmap.



**Shri A. Seshan**, a former Officer-in-Charge of the Department of Economic Analysis and Policy of the Reserve Bank of India, is a music and dance enthusiast. His writings feature regularly in dance and music journals of repute and websites.

## Form IV

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**Pandanallur S. Meenakshisundaram Pillai**  
(1869-1954)

## The Pandanallur Style

- Alarmel Valli

I was a painfully thin, six year old when my mother took me to the great Gurus, Pandanallur Sri Chokkalingam Pillai and his son, Pandanallur Sri Subbaraya Pillai to study Bharatanatyam. During those early years, Periya Vadiyar and Chinna Vadiyar as they used to be known conducted classes in a corporation school hall in Egmore, where the chugging of trains and the mournful hooting of their whistles provided a strange background score for the sound of the tattukazhi and the solkattus. There, in that hardly aesthetic atmosphere, I inherited the profound 'language' of the Pandanallur bani, which has been my anchor through all my dancing years.

The importance of the bani in which a dancer is trained - the 'dance lineage' which one inherits from one's gurus, is, in my view, a vital factor in shaping one's creative growth. A dancer may be exceptionally talented and the Guru may be totally painstaking. But if the bani or vazhi to which one belongs and interprets, is impoverished, flawed or shallow, one's artistic evolution may well be stunted.

The Pandanallur bani takes its name from a little village in Tanjore District in Southern India, which may have remained in quiet obscurity but for being the birth-place of renowned Bharatanatyam guru, Pandanallur Sri. Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. A descendant of the Tanjore Quartet, with a profound knowledge of languages, music and the scriptures, he was perhaps the most celebrated guru of the 20th century, and often hailed as the Father of Bharatanatyam.



**Alarmel Valli**

It is difficult to capture in words, the essence of the Pandanallur bani, merely by analyzing it, adavu for adavu, stipulating the exact pada bhedas, chari bhedas, hastas or other such alphabets of dance which are unique to it. For, while these basic fundamentals are shared by most of the different

Bharatanatyam banis, the subtle, sometimes indefinable nuances and textures that give each style its unique colour and fragrance are more elusive to pinpoint. In my view, the qualities that make each one distinct from the other stem from the individualistic manner in which the dance alphabets are woven together, the specific ways in which the technical dimensions are interpreted and not least, from the aesthetic principles, ideals, perceptions and artistic vision of the Gurus, who shaped their banis and directed their evolution.

It would be impossible for me therefore, to share my perceptions of the Pandanallur style without speaking of my own Gurus, members of Sri Meenakshisundaram Pillai's immediate family and his direct disciples - and of their approach to dance and to teaching. These masters embodied the lofty dance values of this style. While Chokkalingam Pillai, Periya Vadiyar as we knew him, was a formidable figure, who would brook no nonsense and would not suffer incompetence or casualness lightly, Subbaraya Pillai sir, or Chinna Vadiyar, though exacting in his standards, was also the gentlest of Gurus. His classes were illumined by his fascinating stories about his childhood in Pandanallur village. The picture that emerged from these anecdotes was of lives which were consecrated to dance, of



gruelling, relentless sessions of practice and composition, where the pursuit of excellence and integrity to one's convictions formed the bedrock on which their lives and their bani were built.

The Pandanallur bani, reflects the lofty values of its gurus. Understandably, its name has always been synonymous with uncompromising classicism and commitment to excellence. Some of the hallmarks of this style are its rich and diverse adavu vocabulary, the complexity of its rhythmic permutations, its purity of line, power and precision, its emphasis on symmetry and harmony, its lyricism and musicality and its emphatic rejection of anything even remotely smacking of the gimmicky or the pretentious.

Intense musicality has always marked this bani, where melody and movement flow hand in hand, as inextricably linked as a word and its meaning. Subbaraya Pillai always emphasized that the music needed to be internalized before it could flow as movement and he would sternly warn me against pre-composing adavu structures and grafting them onto the song. He helped me understand the seamless connection between word, meaning and music, so vital to this style.

Pandanallur teermanams are habitually crisp and short, crystallizing beauty and perfection of movement and solkattu with complexity of rhythm, in small capsules - complex art in miniature. The adavus faithfully mirrored the rhythmic structure, for my gurus frowned on the practice of uttering cascades of solkattus that were all sound and fury, while the dancer's feet merely picked out simplistic rhythms.

In the evocation of mood and metaphor in abhinaya, the emphasis was on natyadharmi rather than lokadharmi, on lyricism and understatement rather than on overt drama. The kulukku nadai (the lilting gait) for instance, was a consistent element in all the abhinaya segments, a sort of substratum layer, over which the

abhinaya was constructed. I still have vivid memories of Subbaraya Pillai, taking me to the home of a senior dancer, Mythili, and making her demonstrate the kulukku nadai. Up and down a long verandah the tall, slender dancer 'lilted', with me, a tiny, painfully thin 9 year old, tailing her, trying to imitate her gait, while master observed with a keen eye and encouraged me to put more pep into my step!

Clarity of hastas and the wide sweep of the arms while performing abhinaya were also key characteristics. Meandering digressions in the name of sanchari bhava were anathema to these gurus. In their interpretation of padams and javalis, vulgarity in any form was strictly eschewed. In fact, their keen sense of delicacy often led to some of the more explicit charanas in the pada varnams being omitted from their choreography.

Most significantly, in the choreography of the Pandanallur gurus, the focus was always on content rather than packaging, on substance, rather than glitz, glamour or sensationalism. I remember Subbaraya Pillai speaking of sarakku (substance) and minukku (glitter) adavus, stressing the fact that sarakku adavus had to be the bedrock, so to speak, on which the composition rested -- adavus like the sutradavu, kudittu metadavu, tat tai ta ha - that emphasized the natyarambha.

Recently, reviving some of Chokkalingam Pillai's choreography, I was struck afresh by the constant reiteration of the natyarambha and the sutradavu. The 'curved, straight line' of the natyarambha is infinitely difficult to maintain precisely. This would perhaps explain the increasing preference for the 'diagonal straight line', which in recent years has actually begun to overshadow the natyarambha. The frequent lapsing into unwarranted, prolonged poses, or acrobatic renderings of nritya, were innovations eschewed by the Pandanallur

gurus. If at all, any 'ornamentation' occasionally found place, it was strictly endorsed by the context and aesthetics of the dance.

Studying with these masters was a wonderfully enriching experience. There was no spoon-feeding, no detailed analysis of adavus, no elaborate lessons on theory. Yet, I absorbed the most valuable knowledge as much from what they did not say as from what they explained. I learnt much, as it were, through the process of osmosis. For, great masters like Chokkalingam Pillai and Subbaraya Pillai were repositories of the collective consciousness of many generations of dance gurus. Though they never swerved from upholding the highest classical values and aesthetics, shunning all attempts to play to the gallery, my Gurus were men of vision who helped one realize that tradition in the right hands does not stagnate, but has infinite capacity for perpetually evolving and renewing itself.

In those early years - the pre info-technology era - teaching was a leisurely, intense and contemplative process. Televisions, cassette recorders, let alone computers, were motes on the distant horizon. Paradoxically, for me, artistically, this lack of technology was a boon. Students had to rely entirely on memory, observation, on concentration and introspection. This process of intense focus and reflection freed the imagination and enriched creative growth.

My Gurus taught while seated, never actually dancing the adavus. Even in abhinaya, I remember Subbaraya Pillai demonstrating a line of a song with the subtlest flicker of an eye, just suggesting the flow of the arm, or turn of a hasta. The beauty of this method of teaching was that it stimulated the imagination and compelled the student to internalise the lessons taught, so that a creative student could evolve a strongly etched individual style, within a style.

The exponential increase in students of Bharatanatyam around the world and the consequent dearth of good gurus to impart a strong foundation has resulted in many young dancers learning by watching successful dancers. With DVDs also playing the role of modern day 'Gurus', the resulting culture of imitation seems to have resulted in the evolution of a 'global', homogenous Bharatanatyam bani that is dynamic, slick, well-packaged, with clean lines, but where the focus sadly is increasingly on the overt and the sensational, more on packaging than on content.

My early years of training coincided with a period in which Chokkalingam Pillai, along with Subbaraya Pillai was trying to evolve the Pandanallur style further, introducing grace and fluidity into the power, geometry and precision that characterized the adavus of this bani, to give the dance a seamless quality. Chokkalingam Pillai would use the telling metaphor of the toy whistle with a curled feather attached to it, which when blown into, would make the feather unfurl, ever so gracefully into a perfect straight line. "So also, should your arms unfurl in dance", he would say... "Tuvalaiyaa pidil!" (Loosen up), was a frequent admonition.

I also remember Chokkalingam Pillai exhorting the students to infuse the dance with joy and vitality..... "Jadam madiri aadaadey!" ("Don't dance like a jadam!" - a zombie). In the view of these Gurus, a straight line in Bharatanatyam was not merely the shortest distance between two points, but it was a line that throbbed with a pulsating beauty, acquiring an aesthetic appeal: and it was a line drawn not only in space, but in time. It was thanks to both masters that I learnt very early, to savour every step, glance and flick of the hand and turn of the head intensely, differently.

The Pandanallur approach to footwork, particularly as evolved by my Gurus, favoured a gentler approach, rather than

a uniformly hard striking of the floor with the feet. During dance classes, the hall would resound with the crisp, sharp sound of footwork, a clear sound that was generated both from the front and the hollow of the foot, rather than from forceful thumping. Time and again, I remember my masters insisting that footwork should incorporate vallinam, mellinam - (strong and soft rendering, or tonal variations). Even the feet, they would insist, could and should 'sing'. A famous doctor who specialises in Yoga once told me that he thought it was this technique, which had spared me from the ubiquitous knee problems that plague so many young dancers today.

Subbaraya Pillai, the most generous of Gurus, gave of his knowledge without holding back. His guidance about specific characteristics of Pandanallur choreography and his explanation of the mathematics of it are still etched in my mind. In fact, I was barely 15, when he first encouraged me to compose adavus for Veenai Sivanandam Pillai's Thillana in Hamsanandi ragam. When he was working on a new composition for me, master would sometimes bring Thanjavur Kittappa Pillai, his close relative, to our home and ask me to dance the piece for him. They would both then discuss the composition and explain some of the choreographic nuances and intricacies to me. I consider myself blessed to have had the honour of being allowed to observe the creative processes of these great Gurus.

Thematic presentations, which had already started gaining in popularity in the early 70s, were not adopted as an alternative performance format by the Pandanallur Gurus and the margam was mandatory. While theme-based performances can be very interesting to choreograph and are often the preferred choice of many presenters and dancers today, the margam with its perfect structural balance and harmony, contrary

to recent popular opinion, gives ample scope for innovative, creative expression. For me, it offers a vast and diverse palette to choose from. In our age of sensationalism and short attention spans, the solo performance and margam can make enormous demands of both dancer and audience. If it is 'boring', surely we dancers have only ourselves to blame.

Central to the extensive Pandanallur repertoire were compositions of the Tanjore Quartet, with the focus on songs steeped in classicalism. My Gurus had a rich treasure chest of Quartet pada varnams and some tana varnams, many sabdams, jathiswarams and thillanas. To the best of my knowledge, the performances of the Pandanallur Gurus always opened with an alarippu, and the jathiswaram was a must. Kautvam and todayamangalam, or even the pushpanjali, did not feature in the Pandanallur repertoires of those early years. The post-varnam segment of the performance would include padams and javalis of great composers, as also compositions of Gopalakrishna Bharati and Bharatiyar, amongst others and items like *Natanam adinaar* and *Natanam seyyum paadanar*. There were also songs in a lighter musical vein, like *Dikku theriyaada kaattil*, *Teerada vilayaatu pillai*, as also, occasional songs from the Kutraala Kuravanji.

Subbaraya Pillai once took me and my mother to meet the renowned dancer of the Pandanallur bani, Pandanallur Jayalakshmi, at her home, long after she had stopped performing in public. It was in deference to master that she kindly demonstrated the padams, *Velavare* and *Padari Varugudu*. It was a rare and most memorable experience, one that I will always cherish.

Apropos the changing performance scene, as a dancer who straddles two eras - the pre and post info-technology

eras. I remember those distant days, when lighting and stage design for solo Bharatanatyam performances were still in their infancy. We danced in all kinds of spaces from temple festivals and make-shift halls, to the most sophisticated of auditoriums abroad. I have even had cats, bandicoots and cockroaches saunter casually across the stage while I danced! The onus was entirely on the dancer and orchestra to paint the dancing spaces, to fire the imagination of the audience, to create a magic world. Chokkalingam Pillai conducted my arangetram with his inimitable expertise, but after his demise, it was Subbaraya Pillai who took charge of those challenging, yet wonderfully fulfilling years of dance experience. With him at the helm, I could relax, fully confident that he would harmonise every element of the music with his dynamic, musical nattuvangam, keeping the laya

from accelerating, and even covering up errors, when the occasion arose.

A dance bani is like a vast, majestic banyan tree, The Gurus are the branches, that send down many roots, so that the tree grows and spreads, vital and vibrant. My Gurus were magnificent branches on the Pandanallur "Tree" and with their passing, we have lost two Titans of the dance world. But they continue to live on in their dance style and in their students, who, hopefully, will send down their own roots, without compromising the core values of their style and their Gurus' artistic principles, so that the "bani tree" will be nurtured and will keep growing - a thing of beauty is a joy forever.

John Keats reminds us that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all ye need to know." For me, the Pandanallur bani, embodies this eternal value.



Shri Subbaraya Pillai



**Alarmel Valli** received formal training in dance from the renowned Guru Shri Chokkalingam Pillai and his son Shri Subbaraya Pillai. Alarmel Valli has involved herself in research work on classical Tamil anthologies of Sangam poetry. She was the youngest dancer to be awarded the Padma Shri in 1991. She has also received the title Kalaimamani as well as the State Artist Award from the Tamil Nadu Govt. besides several national and international honours.



**Kattumannarkoil Muthukumara Pillai**  
(1874-1960)



**Guru & Shishya**

## Kattumannarkoil

- Ashish Mohan Khokar

If Bharatanatyam be an ocean, then gurus are its many rivers and banis, its tributaries. One such lone river - which had no guru before or after and yet many tributaries - is Kattumannar Koil Vidwan Muthukumara Pillai. "If it is accepted that there are banis in Bharatanatyam, like Pandanallur, Tanjavur and Tiruvidaimarudur among others, then Kattumannar Koil School (bani) of Bharatanatyam owes itself to this one man. For in his family there was no male member into dance before him, nor any after him. His is thus a very unique and unusual instance of the genesis, emergence and consolidation of a whole tradition of dance revolving around just one individual." (Mohan Khokar in Lord's Servitor & Great Dance Master, Sruti Special issue on the Guru).

He was born on the 13th day of the Tamil month Aipassi, (27 October) in 1874, in Kattumannar Koil, also known as Mannargudi, or Kattumannargudi, some 14 miles from Chidambaram. He was the son of Yogam Ammal, a dancer and a musician and his father was Chinnaswami, a petty book-keeper, and at best a rasika. Muthukumaran had only one sister, Kannamba, who was attached as a devadasi to the Sivan temple at Kattumannar Koil.

His mother wanted Muthukumaran to be a dancer, and so from his early childhood she arranged for the best available nattuvanars to coach him. They included Nataraja Pillai, Sabhapati of Rajamannar Koil and Arunachalam of Kattumannar Koil. Muthukumaran started his training at the age of 6, and he had his



**Ashish Mohan Khokar**

arangetram, or debut, some three years later. All along, he not only learnt dance, but acquired sound knowledge of shastras, sahitya and sangeeta. He also learnt Tamil, his mother-tongue, Telugu, the language in which some of the soul-stirring songs of Bharatanatyam are couched, and, to a lesser

extent, Sanskrit. He additionally acquired abhinaya from devadasi Amman Amma of Shiyali and Neelambal of Madras and the great Tiruvallur Gnanam and this helped him emerge as a very polished performer. He started giving professional dance performances from the age of 9, and he continued to perform till he was 27.

Muthukumara Pillai also started teaching Bharatanatyam and classical music at the age of 19. For some years he taught only at his own village, but then for nearly 30 years he travelled to various places, staying at each place for 2 or 3 years only, sometimes even 5, training chosen pupils. Among the places he thus visited and taught were Chidambaram, Vriddhachalam, Mayavaram, Tiruvidaimarudur, Madurai, Nagapattinam and Rameswaram. It was neither wanderlust nor avarice that prompted him to lead this itinerant life, he simply loved to teach, and when he felt he had taught the few deserving pupils he picked at each place, he just moved on.

"Thatha had this desire that Bharatanatyam should become a household art. He came from times and background when the art of the devadasis was looked down upon, so for him it was natural to want to try and propagate it further. He had a burning desire to teach all so Bharatanatyam became popular",



recalls his prime and exclusive disciple, Guru M.K.Saroja.

It was in 1936 that he first came to Madras. For some months, he worked in the Summer School of Indian Music, run by Prof. P. Sambamoorthy, where he taught Bharatanatyam and Kummil, Kolatam folk items. After completing a course here, he presented a few chosen disciples in a programme, which was attended by one Mahalakshmi Ammal, who was so impressed by the Guru's work that she immediately engaged him to train her two young grand-daughters M.K. Selvamani and M.K. Saroja. Thus, for 2 years Guru Muthukumara stayed with this Mudaliar family of Mahalakshmi Ammal and devoted his full time to training the two girls, of whom the elder M.K. Selvamani had her arangetram in 1938. M.K. Saroja was a prodigy, so the guru felt there was no need for an arangetram!

M.K. Selvamani grew up to become India's first woman nattuvanar and M.K. Saroja, an "unpretentious doyenne of Bharatanatyam" (S.Kalidas, Jan. 1999, India Today).

During this time in Madras, Guru Muthukumaran also came in touch with up-and-coming nattuvunars like Ramaiah Pillai and Dandayudhapani Pillai, who benefited considerably by the association. For some time, he also worked with Swarna Saraswati, who helped him refresh his memory with regard to certain aspects of the art he had learnt decades earlier. In 1938, having been impressed with his work, Rukmini Devi Arundale engaged Vidwan

Muthukumara Pillai to teach her, and he taught her all she wanted, including some of his own compositions.

"Although I had learnt from Guru Vidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai, he could not stand and show all postures. Thus, I benefited from learning from Guru Vidwan Muthukumara Pillai who, even at 70, could stand and show each posture. He was agile and used to run two miles on Adyar beach every day!" Rukmini Devi reminisced in the monograph on the Guru published by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1964. "Among the dancer teachers or



nattuvanars I have known, next to Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, he was the only one who had knowledge of the sastras. He was very well read and studied rare books on natya and especially followed Arjuna Bharatam," noted Rukmini Devi in the same monograph.

At the same time, he worked as Bharatanatyam teacher at Kalakshetra where one of his pupils was Radha Sriram, the niece of Rukmini Devi. Years later, recalling his days at Adyar to dance historian Mohan Khokar, Thatha stated "In all my life I never met anyone as passionately devoted to the dance as Rukmini Amma. She had a keen, analytical mind and was never content merely to learn how to perform: she always insisted on knowing why each movement, each pose and each expression that she learned was rendered in a particular way and not in any other."

He left Adyar in 1940 and joined Ram Gopal's Dance Studio in Bangalore. Here

he taught Ram Gopal as well as young Mrinalini Sarabhai. Baby Saroja, was now a star performer in Ram Gopal's troupe and as long as her guru stayed in Bangalore she continued her studies with him. In 1942, during the World War II scare, like many who left Madras for fear of bombing by the Japanese of big cities, to other smaller places, he went to Mayavaram, where, by chance, Baby Kamala had come too. Baby Kamala had been in Madanapalle in 1942 and for neighbours, the family had M.K.Saroja and M.K.Selvamani. She learnt basic adavus from M.K.Selvamani, who also taught her 4 items. But for further training, Selvamani rightly suggested Baby Kamala go to her Guru, Muthukumara Pillai, who was then, by chance at Mayavaram, Kamala's home town! After the war scare got over (and the fear of Japanese bombings that had reached Rangoon, got over) Baby Kamala went to Mayavaram and learnt from the great guru and also performed her arangetram. Not willing to move to Madras he advised her to continue her training under Ramaiah Pillai, which she did. Kamala stated in an interview to Pattabhiraman, the editor of Sruiti, a South-India focused music (and later, dance) monthly, that her adavus were all Kattumannar Muthukumaran style; only items were taught by Ramaiah Pillai. She is on record stating in the same issue on Thatha, that she treats herself as Kattumannar Koil bani. In the period 1944-1947, Guru Muthukumara Pillai was at Coimbatore. He was with the leading drama company of TKS brothers. He trained many boys of the troupe in basic Bharatanatyam, though the dramas never used the style! Such was his passion. He also taught Saroja, the wife of proprietor of Pakshiraja Studios Sriramulu Naidu, for her lead role in the film "Kannika"

In 1948, Mrinalini opened her school Darpana in the wilderness of the desert city of Ahmedabad and she called her

guru to help start it. Then nearing 60, he went to Ahmedabad and stayed for 3 years to help his student Mrinalini propagate Bharatanatyam. He returned to his village after that and stayed put till ten years later, on 22 Aug 1960, at the ripe old age of 84, he died peacefully in his sleep.

He not only taught in cities outside but many came to his abode in the village, staying at his home while he taught them. They include Nala Najan, the American Robert Rivero and Janak Khendry from Punjab, who settled in Canada.

What was Guru Muthukumara Pillai's style? What is his bani?

"His system of adavus was somewhat different from the Pandanallur style. The fundamental difference was that in his style there was more footwork and less utpavanas. In Pandanallur style, the body had to lean forward from the waist upward; Guru Muthukumaran did not like this: he preferred an erect posture, to keep the spine straight" notes Rukmini Devi in the SNA monograph, 1964. "His abhinaya was more detailed and he followed the sastras, while Gowri's (Mylapore Gowri ammal) was more spontaneous. In Bharatanatyam certain differences were to be observed between the different teachers and artistes, but the basic pattern and style was the same and was founded on years of disciplined training and dedicated study and practice. Muthukumaran style was very pure, with clear arm movements which were firm without being rigid and soft and rounded without being sloppy." Rukmini Devi concludes.

"He wanted clean lines – no dazzle and no hurly-burly. He wanted dance to look smooth, not jerky. His dance was the mirror image of the man – always calm and composed. He did not have patience with stiff, taut, sharp-edged, angular, incisive movements of the arms and hands. He wanted the movement to

appear firm but effortless. In *nritta* he insisted that the termination of one *adavu* and the beginning of the next should not appear broken as if there is no relationship between the two, but be marked by a subtle overlapping, giving the suggestion of continuity. Like in writing, where there are punctuation marks but these in no way impede or disrupt the flow of the text. He also followed the well-worn prescription that where the hand goes the eyes follow, but he was able to invest this with a telling impact, especially with phrases like *taddin-gina-tom* and *kita-thaka-tharikitta-thom*." Mohan Khokar observes in his monograph on the Guru in 1964.

"My friend E. Krishna Iyer connected me to this great guru. His art had luminous purity. He insisted on flawless footwork combined with clear lines of the arms, erect posture and carriage of the shoulders and the spine, and very vivid expressions for *abhinaya*," recalled Ram Gopal, another of his disciples.

He gave absolute importance to rhythm. Towards this, an exercise his pupils had to do was to render footwork alone, which meant to ensure that the positions of the heels and the feet were distinctively in tune with the requirements of the stressed and unstressed beats. Another method was to have the student execute rhythmic passages to the accompaniment of the melodic refrain but with no support through recitation of syllables or beating out the pattern from the teacher.

"It was in the early forties that he brought his star pupil Baby Saroja who looked and danced like a miniature Pallava bronze! I cannot recollect having seen – at that time – her equal in the perfection of pure rhythmic dance sequences. She was, in a word, flawless," noted Ram Gopal, reflecting on the Guru's focus on rhythm.

"For *abhinaya*, Muthukumaran always first patiently explained the evident as

well as the inherent meaning of the words of the song and then, by himself demonstrating over and over again, conveyed and taught appropriate *hastas* and expressions. He stressed that if one could learn to create the feeling within, expression would automatically follow. For this reason, he did not teach children emotive pieces, the import of which was beyond their grasp. Being a staunch *bhakta*, he naturally created and was inclined towards compositions with devotional leanings. He composed several songs and other pieces and, apart from teaching these, he diligently recorded them in notebooks. As a diversion, he rendered some of the popular and fashionable Telugu *varnas* into Tamil, retaining precisely the same structure, *raga*, *tala*. His greatest asset, unlike other *nattuvans* and *gurus*, was that he taught everything standing up himself and demonstrating step by step." noted Mohan Khokar.

He counted himself as much teacher of dance, as music. In addition to vocal, he was thoroughly at home with violin. At Chidambaram, where he stationed himself often, he taught more music than dance! He was also an avid photographer, using a pinhole camera and he developed and printed his own photos. He was a genius and multi-talented Bharatanatyam *vidwan*, a complete guru, in today's parlance!

However, his *bani* had an interesting historical or circumstantial twist of fate. While many known stars of the Bharatanatyam learnt from him, like Ram Gopal, Rukmini Devi, Kamala and Mrinalini, they also learnt from Guru Meenakshi Sundaram and as he was more senior (by 6 years) and stayed put in his village, their styles got to be known as Pandanallur or Guru Meenakshi Sundaram's. Muthukumaran *Tatha* never claimed or contested or even suggested they call it both or partly after him, because for him, promotion of art of

Bharatanatyam was far more important than individual names or *bani*. The idea of divisive *bani* came much later; way back in the revival of Bharatanatyam, it was about Bharatanatyam, not *bani*. He never taught for name or fame. This is most reflected in his only student who learnt only from him and remains till date his sole and exclusive inheritor, M.K.Saroja. At almost 80 today, she has had a long innings in Tamil films ("*Nalla Tambi*", "*Paithyakaran*", "*Krishna Bhakti*", etc), Bharatanatyam performing, teaching and dancing for an unbroken 60 years. While she taught few items to Yamini, Indrani, Kiran among others, her main students are all in Paris, with Vidya being the principal exponent today. The great guru's art went from Chidambaram to Champs Elysees as M.K.Saroja's over 200 students are all French! My art is my guru's gift, he taught me just about 7 to 8 items, if I've now created over 85 items (all recorded), it is only by his grace" notes M.K.Saroja, humbly.

Gurus Muthuswami Pillai, Kunchitapadam Pillai, T.K.Narayan and T.V. Sounderajan also are of the same *bani*. While Guru Muthuswami based himself in Mylapore and taught many, including the French senior Malavika, Guru Kunchitapadam Pillai established a school named Kattumannaragudi Muthukumara Natyalaya. He called himself Tillai Muthukumaradasan and even composed a *stuti* on his guru! T.K. Narayan was Principal of Government Music and Dance College in Hyderabad

and TVS had studied as a young boy in TK Narayan's brother's drama company in Coimbatore.

Janak Khendry in Canada, Nala Najan in New York, Milena Salvini in Paris and many more have benefited by the style. M.K.Saroja was married to pioneering scholar-historian-critic-collector late Prof. Mohan Khokar and with him spent years teaching in M.S. University in Baroda and when he joined the Sangeet Natak Academi in Delhi, she shifted base there and taught select pieces to Indrani Rehman, Yamini Krishnamurthy, Kiran Segal and later to youngsters like Rasika Khanna, Shobhana Radhakrishna and Shanta Raghavan.

In M.K. Saroja's style the *bani* is best evident in its purity of lines, clarity of *hastas* and *adavus* and an effortless connecting link between each sequence. Her popular items are all devotional in content, be it *Varugulamo* or *Krishna Nee*. She has been hailed as his true successor and only survivor of his style, though many learnt from him. She is an SNA awardee and E.Krishna Iyer awardee too. She has lived a peaceful life, away from mainstream and served her guru's memory and art. A photo of his in her prayer room is worshipped daily, 50 years after the guru passed away on in 1960.

This *bani* is about art, not the artistry or even the artiste. It is art as spirituality.

Ashish Mohan Khokar acknowledges with thanks the inputs provided by his mother Smt. M. K. Saroja.

Ashish Mohan Khokar learnt Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi before taking to arts administration. Since 1999 he has edited and published India's only yearbook on dance – Attendance, and written-photographed over 20 books on Indian culture. He is also India's only dance books publisher today. He is a widely-read dance writer, with columns in *Narthaki* and *India Today*. He is inheritor-curator of India's largest dance archives created by his father, the late Mohan Khokar.

## Vazhuvoor Bani

- Kamala Lakshminarayanan



Vazhuvoor Ramalah Pillai  
(1910- 1979)

**B**ani is a way of teaching, using movements in a certain way. For example: The *Pandanallur bani* concentrates more on dance form than *abhinaya*. The *Thanjavur bani*, exemplified by Balasaraswathi, puts more emphasis on *abhinaya* than dance. Veena Dhanammal and the tradition she established, specialized in *padams* and less on *kirthanas* and *ragam-tanam-pallavi* like regular singers. In essence, each artist follows a *bani* established as a tradition. They follow the guru's ideas and thoughts. It's like weaving a sari: different weavers specialize in different patterns in the weave; some weavers specialize in weaving designs that incorporate birds and animals, some weavers specialize in patterns containing sculptures. So, that is like a *bani*.

Vazhuvoorar, I would say, placed equal emphasis on dance movements like *jati korvais*, for example, which included several beats like *tisra nadai*, *misram*, *khandam* and *sankeernam*. He would infuse life in a *jati* with nine beats. So the *jatis* were very fast and all the three speeds would be performed, first, second and third. He also emphasized *sollukattu* which created a powerful effect. *Sollukattu* is very important because an audience listens to it while watching a dance.

With regard to *abhinaya*, Vazhuvoorar incorporated a lot of story-telling. He did not like to repeat the same movements over and over, as in some other *banis*. In a song, if the same line is repeated twice or thrice with the same dance movements, there is no opportunity utilized to present



Kamala Lakshminarayanan

a story. *Vinyasam* in dance is like *neraval* in music.

I recently spoke to a couple of *Kalakshetra* artists who agreed that *Rukmini Arundale* incorporated *Kathakali* movements in the *Kalakshetra* style because she felt that *Kathakali abhinaya*, the make-up and

movements such as jumps, as well as the loud drums had a powerful effect on dance. As a dancer she must have liked that and it was something new that she added into the traditional *Pandanallur bani* that they followed.

### Characteristic features of the bani.

With regard to *adavus* performed, the *sarukku-adavu* is one in which you are supposed to sit on the toes, with heels raised and the knees fully stretched side-to-side, or a leg stretched out backwards. Certain *banis* adopt the flat-on-the-feet sitting down position, instead of sitting on the toes. Also the *adavu* in which the arm is stretched from above the head and taken all the way down to touch the toe is not followed in all *banis*. In some *banis*, the arm is not stretched down all the way to the toes, but stops mid-way and is brought up again. The *Vazhuvoor bani* adopts more rigorous *adavus* and teaches the *sarukku-adavu* seated on the toes with the heels raised and the knees fully stretched sideways. Similarly, the arm movements stretch all the way down to touch the toe. In steps like *thai thai dithi* *thai thai* starting on the right foot, for example, the hand is stretched from the chest in *alapadmam hasta*, going up on the right side and brought down to touch the left knee. That is what we do in the *Vazhuvoor bani*.



Also, Vazhuvoorar incorporated a lot of poses to aesthetically transit between *jatis*, rather than letting the dancer stand there with the arms at the waist, breathing heavily.

Some gurus use a lot of Kuchipudi movements to increase the pace of a dance. Kuchipudi is famous for its jumps and spins. In terms of footwork, in both Kuchipudi and Odissi, in *dhi thi thai*, for instance, one foot goes backwards and then comes to rest beside the other foot.

In depicting *abhinaya*, *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi* styles have to be used. Some artists depicting a butterfly would flutter the eyes too much and do the *abhinaya* for a longer time than necessary, much like in Kathakali. That is *lokadharmi*.

Vazhuvoorar's approach to *abhinaya* is very much in the *natyadharmi* style. He followed everything prescribed in the *Natyashastra*.

Regarding *hastakshetra* or the positioning of hand movements in Bharatanatyam, a *pataka*, for example, is shown with the palm opened out flat and the arm raised up near the shoulder. That looks very aesthetic. In other dance styles like Kuchipudi and Odissi, they do the *pataka* facing down. The Bharatanatyam artist should always note hand positions and make sure they are properly aligned. They should not appear to be hanging loose or sagging.

In the Vazhuvoor school of dance, we include *javalis* and *padams*. The decision depends on the dancer's age. If the

dancer is a 7 or 8-year old doing an *arangetram*, *javalis* and *padams* are not suitable for the child. But if the performer is in her teens, we teach her *javalis* and *padams*, because she can express herself as a teenage girl in love, depicting *sringara rasa*.

In the Vazhuvoor *bani*, we do look for rare *kritis*. But we do not perform a (surreal) piece on the journey of the soul of the deceased, for instance, because we do not think that is an appropriate theme. *Kritis* of the Trinity are good for young performers, around 11 or 12 years old, because such *kritis* have easy-to-follow *sahityam* and *talam* and are suitable for them, even though such music was not composed for dance.

The Tanjore Quartet's *Vadivelu* always composed in *sringara bhava* and catered to the kings- the Travancore Maharaja, the Mysore Maharaja and the Tanjore Maratha Maharaja. Those songs always express love, sometimes with sensual content to

evoke such feelings in those kings watching the dance.

My Guru felt that, once in a while it was alright to perform *abhinaya* for songs expressing love, but avoided verses that were not appropriate. *Sringara* that is depicted must be good and noble, but *sringara* expressing vulgarity is not appropriate in classical dance. That is what my Guru felt and I totally agree with him.

Many years ago people used dance costumes in a different way. They just

wrapped themselves in a sari because they did not want the sari to be cut into different pieces and wasted. But the present Bharatanatyam costume is very suitable for dance that incorporates a lot of poses and enables free movement of the legs. However, if a dancer is very tall, a sari-dress is more suitable since it does not accentuate her height. On the other hand, if a dancer is only of moderate height, like 5 feet 2 inches, wearing a Bharatanatyam dress enhances her stature. My mother was excellent in designing dance costumes, especially with colour schemes. Other students of my Guru would take her advice on making costumes.

Make-up is very essential but need not be as heavy as in Kathakali. Moderate make-up is appropriate, with bold eyeliner, so that the person sitting in the back of the auditorium can see the expressions of the dancer.

It is better to have a singer with a melodious voice and a proper *nattuvanar* to recite the *jatis* and keep the *talam*. A *nattuvanar* should have skills similar to *konnakol*. Such a person should be able to recite *mrudangam jatis*. I prefer that the singer and *nattuvanar*, each perform separate roles. It definitely enhances the quality of the program.

The trend of having a different orchestra at the city of performance is not so good. Without sufficient practice there will be no understanding between a dancer and the orchestra. It is better that each dance school maintains its own orchestra so that they (the orchestra) are familiar with the *sollus* and *jatis*. Without sufficient rehearsals, a dance program cannot be performed well.

In the past, an orchestra would include a singer, a *nattuvanar*, veena player, flute, *mrudangam* player, etc. The guru would usually do the *nattuvangam*. Financial constraints have arisen because *sabhas* are not able to pay an orchestra, so artists

have to settle for people who can combine the skills of a singer and *nattuvanar*, a *mrudangam* player and either a violin or flute player. It has come down to a three piece orchestra.

During the initial stages, we start the student on dance, giving more prominence to footwork, helping them develop an understanding and competence with rhythm. We make them practice this rhythm in the first, second and third speeds. In that we start *thattu adavu*, *natu adavu*, *kuditha adavu*, *sarukku adavu* and *sutr adavu* or *brahmaris* or spins to the left and then the right.

In Bharatanatyam training, most schools follow the same basic *adavu* patterns. Then we start the *tattu-mettu*. However, certain *tattu-mettus* are done very differently these days. Some schools teach just the toe-hit. They don't do the 'hit-heel-toe-heel.' This is how I do it.

Yoga lessons could be taught before the dance lesson once students become more advanced with the basic steps. As I do not have my own premises to conduct dance lessons, I encourage my students to take yoga lessons outside. I always make sure that my students acquire skill with footwork in all the three speeds, as well as in *abhinaya*.

Yoga definitely helps the limbs and body become supple and flexible.

In our school, we emphasize that students make the rhythm clear with their footwork, by hitting hard. The footwork actually speaks, when doing a *dhi thi thai*.

If had my own premises, I would have personally given my students music lessons and appointed an *acharya* for lessons in Sanskrit. This is important because the complete *natya vedas* and *hastas* are described in Sanskrit.

Regarding training in *abhinaya*, my Guru used to teach facial expressions. He

would say, "This is how you have to do the expressions: showing surprise, or showing sorrow." He would explain the meaning of the song. I would follow his direction, showing surprise or sorrow. If there is nobody to guide dancers with regard to expression, they could stand in front of a mirror and practice them- the *navarasas*. Expressions should not be exaggerated because they will not look dignified or natural. For example, a *rakshasi* does not have to be depicted grotesquely, with the tongue hanging out and excessive jumping. The drama through *abhinaya* then becomes exaggerated and does not convey the right spirit to the audience.

With reference to food, the Indian diet is very balanced in nutrition. I am a vegetarian and have always been that way. A little extra glucose or juices, like orange juice, either before or after the performance, will help the dancer. However, I always feel that real strength comes from the inner mind, not entirely from the food that is eaten. It is spiritual energy that helps more.

Do gurus share all their knowledge with their *shishyas*? I don't really know. There is a Tamil proverb that translates as: 'Give alms to the person who deserves it.' Give food to the person who is really hungry and who really wants it, not to the person who wants to cheat you by saying that he is hungry and desperate for food and money. If you give alms to such (undeserving) people, your gift will not be fruitful. Similarly, the guru knows whether to share his or her knowledge with the *shishya* and whether the *shishya* really deserves it.

Gurus did not really encourage *shishyas* to become teachers because teaching is their profession. They did not want youngsters to come up and take away their students. I would not start classes and take away my Guru's students. I would tell them to go to him first because

he is a good teacher. Only if he was not happy with a particular student and openly said, 'I cannot teach this student,' would I consider teaching that student if she came to me. But it is only by teaching students that a guru's legacy can be propagated. Many gurus teach *nattuvangam* to people who don't dance or choreograph, but are proficient in rhythm and *sollus*. I have also heard of groups in Chennai who train students in choreography. They give them a song and ask them to set it to dance. The students learn from their mistakes.

Regarding learning the art from the electronic media, it is not so good, but a lot of people do that these days. I think it is best to stay with one guru and learn that *bani* instead of learning the art from various teachers and other sources. It would only end up as a *khichdi* that is tasteless. I also find that people bring their video cameras to a performance and record a guru's choreography and try to copy it. I find that sickening because it is piracy.

When dancers move from one guru to another, it is not a good trend. Bringing in alien movements from other styles will definitely dilute the purity of a particular style and in the end, they start looking similar. It is true. But once in a while, borrowing a couple of movements or steps from a different style is not harmful, although they should not be completely copied from another style. One '*kita thaka thathi kita thom*' borrowed from Kuchipudi, just to bring in a different look in the choreography, will not harm the dance, as long as complete movements are not imported.

There is nothing wrong with fusion and *jugalbandi*, if each dancer preserves the purity of their style. A dancer doing Kathak should only perform Kathak movements to a particular piece of music and another dancer doing Bharatanatyam should only perform

Bharatanatyam movements. Then the audience will be able to appreciate the differences of each style. It is like giving an audience a taste of each style.

I never present social themes at all. We always present mythology because it is so powerful. It is like listening to *katha kalakshepam*. If you listen to *katha kalakshepam* about a God and his power and his doings, it brings mental strength to us human beings who are weak and powerless, in facing problems in our lives.

I don't think a margam will become extinct at all; people who want to perform a margam will definitely do so.

In those days, around the 1940s and 50s, group presentations were not that popular. Only people like Ram Gopal and Madam Azzuri would present group dances to keep audiences interested in the art. Group presentations are definitely appealing and eye-catching. Presenting different patterns such as circles, etc, is exciting. I like group choreography. Some people are excellent at that. Duets are also very good.

My Guru choreographed dance dramas, but not with a big group of performers. I

don't recall any such presentation. As three sisters, we used to present dance dramas like *Kutrala Kuravanji*, *Valli Bharatham*, *Silapathikaram* and so on. The problem with big groups is that not all dancers are of the same standard. When dancers who still have deficiencies start performing solo dances, it is not very good.

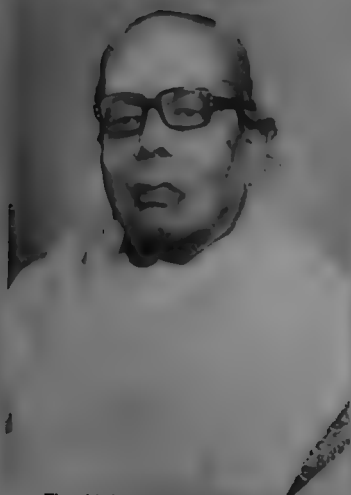
In the dance *Natanam Adinaar*, we always enhance the rhythm in the *charanam*, which goes as, '*Ashta disaiyum gidu gidunga ena*.' When I was once performing this dance, my Guru started singing '*Ashta disaiyum*' in a very fast tempo, which I had never done. Somehow I managed to keep up that speed in my dancing. But after the performance, I shed tears before my Guru. I said, "Saar, you took such a speed that I was worried whether I could handle it. Thank God it is finished!" He said, "I'm sorry Kamala. I should not have taken on that speed, but something came upon me and I was totally lost. Please forgive me. Don't feel bad about it." That was a touching incident that I remember during a performance.

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**Kamala** trained under Guru Muthukumara Pillai. She later became the prime disciple of Natyacharya Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai and is acknowledged as the foremost exponent of the 'Vazhuvoor Bani'. She is the recipient of several awards like the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Padma Bhushan, the 'E.Krishna Iyer Medal' instituted by the Sruiti Foundation the prestigious 'Branta Professorship' by the Colgate University, USA & 'Sangeeta Ratnakara' at the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana.



**Panchapakesa Nattuvanar**  
(1842-1902)



**Tiruvidaimarudur P Kupplah Pillai**  
(1887-1981)

## Thanjavur Bani of Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir

Prepared by Jyothi Mohan based on interviews of Guru K. Kalyanasundaram and other Gurus of Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir



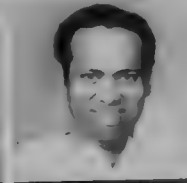
**T. K. Mahalingam Pillai**  
(1916-2002)



**A. T. Govindaraja Pillai**  
(1914-84)



**Smt. Karunambal**  
(b. 1923)



**K. Kalyanasundaram**  
(b. 1932)

**S**ri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir, Mumbai, is regarded as an institution par excellence for Bharatanatyam. For over 65 years, it has been preserving and propagating the tenets of the Thanjavur style, which is marked by discipline and aesthetic grace. It was in



**T. K. Maruthappa Pillai**  
(1920-1969)

Panchapakesa Nattuvanar was also honoured by the royal houses of Baroda and Mysore. He is credited with compiling in Tamil *Abhinaya Navaneetham*, a monumental treatise on Abhinaya and a practical guide especially to Hastabhinaya based on Nandikeswara's *Abhinaya Darpanam*.

1945 that Guru Sri A.T. Govindaraja Pillai, assisted by his wife Smt. Karunambal, founded the Kala Mandir. The success of this venture led to the migration of Guru Govindaraja Pillai's father-in-law, the patriarch, Bharata Vidwan Sri T.P Kupplah Pillai and family from Thanjavur to Bombay. Starting with just four students, the institution, in course of time, grew into a large banyan tree, with sons Guru T.K. Mahalingam Pillai and Guru K. Kalyanasundaram contributing their individual brilliance.

The Rajarajeswari Gurus have an illustrious lineage of ancestors dating back to more than three centuries. Sri Venkatakrishna Nattuvanar enjoyed the patronage of the Maratha ruler Serfoji II of Thanjavur. The second generation of Sri Veeraswamy Nattuvanar and his sister Chinnappa Ammal were followed by the renowned Sri Panchapakesa Nattuvanar who was the Samsthana Vidwan of Thanjavur and Ramanathapuram courts.

His only son Bharata Vidwan Kupplah Pillai was the prime architect of Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir. In the early 1940's he was credited with having revived the ancient *kavuthvams* especially the *Navasandhi Kavuthvams*. He presented them in Mumbai in early 1960, performed by his senior-most *shishya*, Sudha Chandrashekar (nee Doraiswamy). His "Kamala Chakram", a lotus-wheeled compendium depicting the *matra*-based complex 108 *talas*, besides the popular 35 *talas*, is invaluable to all students of music and dance. For his great contribution to the art form he was the first ever *Natyacharya* to be honoured with the Fellowship of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi.

His son-in-law Sri A.T.Govindaraja Pillai and sons Sri T.K.Mahalingam Pillai, Sri T.K. Maruthappa Pillai and Sri K. Kalyanasundaram, along with daughter



Smt. Karunambal and daughter-in-law Smt. Mythili Kalyanasundaram have helped the institution to blossom into what it is today. His son, Sri T.K. Maruthappa Pillai kept this tradition alive at Calcutta for 20 years before his untimely demise. The institution continues the *parampara* that Guru Kuppiah Pillai started way back in 1945. It has trained the current generation of Gurus G. Vasant Kumar, M. Vishwanath and K. Harikrishna. This generation has already proved its ability to carry on the tradition with dedication, freshness in choreography and the ability to adapt to the changing milieu. This is the only institution of Bharathanatyam being run entirely by a family of Natyacharyas who are the inheritors of the bani.

The gurus of Rajarajeswari have blazed new trails in adapting training to the needs of changing times, inculcating gurukula norms in institutional coaching and giving a new presentational format. They have been adept in adapting lyrics in various languages to Bharatanatyam, using it as a vehicle for national integration. The versatility of the Gurus shines through the dance dramas, the ballets, the *ekaharya* depictions they have choreographed, in all of which, the aesthetic grace of the Thanjavur bani catches the eye. Established Kathak exponents like Damayanti Joshi, Roshan Kumari, Sitara Devi and Gopi Krishna, to name only a few, had occasion to watch the work of these Gurus. They were so impressed by the aesthetics of this glorious bani, that, diehard Kathak exponents though they were, they came to Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir to learn Bharatanatyam under these illustrious Gurus.

The geometric exactitude in the way the limbs are aligned gives their *adavus* the distinctive aesthetic touch. The symmetry and grace in the movements, with the body in the centre makes for delightful viewing. There is no ungainly bending over

or overstretching of any part of the body at any time. The head and hand movements are marked by alluring grace with neither stiffness in movement nor slackness; *azhuttam* as well as beauty mark all movements of the limbs. *Azhuttam* and grace in movements is achieved through rigorous training and practice and is the distinguishing feature of this bani. The large variety of *adavus* ensures that the *tillanas*, *jatiswarams* etc. have *korvais* that are not repetitive in nature. In every *korvai* or *jati* different *nritta* *hastas* are employed, to make for interesting viewing. Grammar is strictly adhered to, but at the same time innovations within the traditional framework give a touch of freshness to the *jatis*. The *jatis* are not long-winded monotonous grouping of *adavus*. They are short and crisp, employing several permutations and combinations of *jaatis* interwoven so cleverly, that the layman does not realize the extent of complication in the calculation. Relaxed presentation as opposed to the frenzied execution of *jatis* is characteristic of this bani. The Gurus are also strict about following *jati lakshanas*. *Mrudanga jatis* are aligned with the *sollukattu*, and not the other way round. The *korvais* in the *nritta* items are so beautifully composed, that they ensure coverage of the entire stage, with finesse, without any hasty running around or with giant leaps, as is the norm these days. A sense of proportion prevails in all the compositions.

Guru Mahalingam Pillai strongly believed in '*sukhanubhava*', in both, *nritta* and *abhinaya*. In *varnams*, he felt, the *nritta* for *chittaswarams* should flow along the *swara* pattern the first time and employ cross rhythms when repeated. The Gurus of this school firmly believe that power below the waist and grace above it is the essence of good *nritta*.

"There is much more to choreography than mere putting together a few *hastas* to elaborate the *sahitya*", says Guru

Kalyanasundaram. "We delve into the background of each composition and choreograph it in a way so as to do full justice to the poet's imagination." Thus each composition that is choreographed stands out for its sheer brilliance like a well-polished gem. *Sabdams*, *padams*, *javalis* and *kritis* are handled in a scholarly manner. Guru Kalyanasundaram was among the first to introduce musical preludes in *padams* and *javalis* to establish the story line. The visual impact of this, in the *javali Saramaina*, *ashtapadi Dheera sameere*, etc. was highly appreciated by the audience four decades ago. Guru Mahalingam Pillai too had used a musical prelude for the composition of *Arunachala Kavi-Yaarenru Raghavanai Ennineer*. He felt that the story line of the golden deer attracting Sita to the extent of her imploring Rama to catch it for her, Rama's voice calling out to Lakshmana in distress, Sita voicing her doubts about Lakshmana when he fails to heed her pleas to hasten to Rama's aid, provoking him to cry out: "Who do you think Rama is?", has to be enacted to bring out the *bhava* of the lyrics.

*Abhinaya* is subtle, suggestive. The Gurus of this bani have always eschewed overt *abhinaya* perfecting the art of suggestion. They strongly believe that it is the duty of the dancer to suggest and the audience to imagine it. Thus one needs to convey the emotion, not thrust it down the audience, they aver. Dignity and decorum are never compromised. "For me, it is very important that the *abhinaya* should touch a chord in the layman in the audience," says Guru Kalyanasundaram. The gurus are very particular that students adhere to *paatra lakshanam*. Guru Mahalingam Pillai was against over-dramatisation. *Abhinaya* is mostly *natyadharmi*. *Lokadharmi* approach to *abhinaya* is used very rarely. Guru Mahalingam Pillai and Guru Kalyanasundaram felt the need for elaboration, to put across the *sahitya* to the present-day audiences. They believe

that unlike the court or temple audiences of yore, the present-day audiences are not as knowledgeable of our mythology or languages. Guru Mahalingam Pillai was known for his exquisite *abhinaya* for *padams* and *javalis*. He himself had written beautiful Tamil *padams*. He demonstrated rare *padams* as well as complex *talas* before delighted audiences at seminars and conferences. With his innovative and imaginative choreography, Guru Kalyanasundaram has distinguished himself in unique presentations at the Manifestations of Shiva (World Shiva Meet, Philadelphia, in 1981), at the Sydney Arts Festival and at the Singapore Arts Festival. Full length productions of the compositions of Purandaradasa, Adi Sankara and Tyagaraja as well as dance dramas *Vasantavalli*, *Tyagabrahmanjali*, *Sri Andal*, *Charanapaduka*, *Skanda Leela*, and *Sri Krishna Leela*, have been very well received by the critics and connoisseurs alike. In 1986, Guru Kalyanasundaram, along with other eminent gurus of other classical dance styles, namely, Pandit Birju Maharaj, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, and Guru Vempatti Chinna Satyam, presented a programme entitled 'National Integration through Dance'. This path-breaking effort received wide acclaim.

Almost every type of composition has been choreographed by the Gurus of Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir. Compositions of the Tanjore Quartet, Trinity, Swati Tirunal, Narayaneeyam, Gita Govinda, Thirupugazh, Thirukkural, poems of saint poets, national poets of India, Nepal, China, Indonesia etc. have been presented by them. The repertoire covers the whole gamut of the *margam*, thematic dancing and group productions. This huge reserve of composed items in addition to the quest of the Gurus to expand the repertoire ensures variety in their presentations.

A dance performance can rise to great heights only with musical support of an equally high order. The Gurus of this bani emphasise on singing with bhava and with clarity of sahitya. Guru Kalyanasundaram says, "When more than one instrument accompanies the vocalist, they should take turns to play. For the performance to be soul-stirring, the music has to play its part effectively. There are usually about 8-10 members in our full-bench orchestra. This adds depth to the music and offers variety to the rasika". The nattuvanars of this bani are also accomplished musicians and can sing along while wielding the cymbals. The jatis made by these Gurus are distinct from the *mrudangam* sollus adopted by many. Guru Kalyanasundaram and the younger Gurus have deep resonant voices which are well-modulated when reciting the jatis, adding to the overall compelling impact. Guru Maruthappa Pillai was an excellent choreographer and contributed to this bani as well. He was a respected *mrudanga* vidwan and a disciple of the legendary Azhaga Nambi Pillai. Guru Govindaraja Pillai besides being a *nadaswaram* vidwan, was an excellent *sangeetha* vidwan too. His brief raga essays before each item of dance, elicited praise from musicians of repute and created the right ambience for exposition by the dancer. His sound knowledge as well as mellifluous voice enriched every recital. Guru Mahalingam Pillai's deep knowledge of music was evident in his melodious singing. "Those who cannot sing are only Tattuvannars! The Guru has to be adept in music to qualify as a Nattuvannar", he would say. Guru Kalyanasundaram's flair for composing and setting to music several new pieces for dance has been an asset. Thus watching a presentation by this school is an audio-visual delight.

Guru Kalyanasundaram strongly feels that one must choose one's guru with care and stay faithful to him, for he will

help you realise all your dreams and goals. He feels the *margam* is here to stay. It is the most scientific format for imparting systematic training with variety and gradual progression from the simple to the complicated, both for the performer and the viewer. "Of course, these days we do theme-based performances on demand from religious institutions or sabhas. But, that is no threat to the *margam*," he said. "Dancing as a group, is not a recent phenomenon", he said. "In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the devadasi shishyas had done jatis in a group, in the Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji. "Pinnal kolattam and similar semi classical or folk items were performed by groups of devadasi shishyas of this *parampara* in temples", he stated. "Though solo performances were the norm all along, of late, we encourage group programmes, as more *shishyas* get an opportunity to perform," Gururji clarified. "It is interesting from the point of view of the audience too", he added.

Guru Kalyanasundaram is not in favour of people learning from DVDs etc. He believes, there is no learning, only imitation, which does not help a student of dance at all. This divine art form can only be learnt under proper guidance from an able guru. The approach to teaching dance, is embedded an ancient institution of transmission of knowledge through live instruction and direct experience, he reiterated.

The gurus have encouraged their students to teach, imparting them with necessary skills before they branch out on their own. Several students of this bani have established themselves very successfully as independent teachers all over the world, earning laurels for their alma mater.

Guru Kalyanasundaram says, "Although all schools follow the *Natya Shastra*, gurus of a lineage evolved their own style depending on their individual creativity,

aesthetics and execution of these fundamental tenets. Successive generations of the *parampara* followed it and thus it crystallized into a distinct bani.

But the bani is like a big tree, adding new branches as it grows. The generation that follows, adds its own dimension, mindful of the guiding framework".

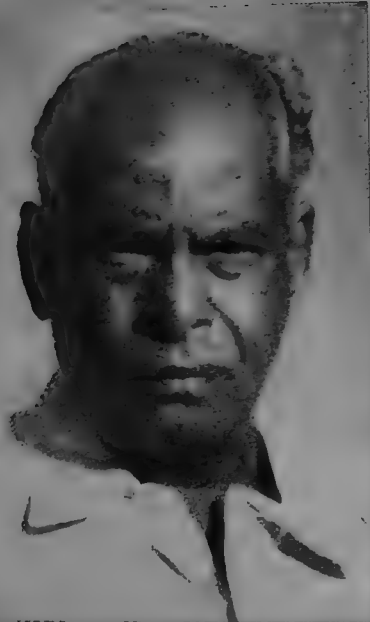
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Scenes from Vasanthavalli

## Understanding Thanjavur Bani Through Guru Kittappa

- Dr. Sucheta Bhide Chapekar



**Kittappa Pillai**  
(1913-1999)

My first memories of Guru Kittappa date back to 1960s when I was still a young student with Acharya Parvatikumar. He used to come to Masterji's (Parvatikumar's) house for talams (cymbals). Masterji had experimented with a new alloy for preparing the talams of various pitches. Kittappa had an appreciative eye for such things and he opted for Masterji's talams instead of the ones normally available in the shops. My knowledge of Bharatanatyam was really very limited at that time but I could observe the eagerness with which Masterji use to ask me to perform the newly choreographed compositions of Serfoji for Kittappa. I could also feel the utmost reverence with which Masterji regarded him. I hardly knew then, that this was indeed the Master through whom I was finally to understand the depth of the great art of Bharatanatyam and the finer nuances of the Thanjavur bani.

It was in the 1970s that I had performed my arangetram under the guidance of Acharya Parvatikumar. I was already performing the Marathi compositions of King Serfoji of Thanjavur choreographed by him, in full swing. At that time, my father was my sole, personal guide and critic. Ours is not a musical family and my parents, though lovers of music hardly knew anything about traditional dance. However, my father was an artist, a painter. One of his comments which I took quite seriously was to finally mould my own total perception of Bharatanatyam aesthetics. He used to say, "Sucheta, you have all the technical perfection in your dance but when I see the traditional dancers like Balasaraswati, I feel that



**Dr. Sucheta Bhide Chapekar**

there is something lacking in your style. I cannot pinpoint what it is but you will have to find it out for yourself."

As a keen observer and ardent admirer of Balasaraswati's dance, I felt that her exposition was the best one could achieve in Bharatanatyam. She was my

ideal and I longed to emulate her. Balamma belonged to the Thanjavur school. Watching her, it struck me that Bharatanatyam is essentially music or in other words, dance is visual music. Bala literally used to sing with her body. I later noticed the same in Guru Kittappa's disciples. I became aware that the Thanjavur bani ideally treats dance as visual music. It was indeed very rewarding at that time to watch the recitals of Vyjayanthimala with Kittappa doing the nattuvangam. I always had a keen ear for music and it did not take long for me to realize what was lacking in my dance. It was the total feel of music. I immediately started with formal training in Carnatic music. This gave me a true insight into the musical nuances of Bharatanatyam. Earlier I had merely enjoyed the music, now I was beginning to understand how music could be danced. Finally the essence of the Thanjavur bani was becoming clearer to me. I had found something which was close to my heart and suited my temperament.

When my own research of Thanjavur Maratha ruler's dance compositions took me deeper into the subject and I thought of presenting King Shahaji's compositions in dance form, the only person I could think of approaching was Kittappa. In the beginning reaching him was not easy. There were lots of questions



before me- whether he would accept to teach a Maharashtrian, whether he would have any apprehensions about my earlier training and whether he would find it worthwhile giving a thought to King Shahaji's Marathi, Hindi and Sanskrit musical literature. There was this practical problem of verbal communication too. Kittappa did not know any language other than Tamil and Telugu and I was not exactly fluent in them. But I need not have worried. There was this common language, the language of love and understanding for Bharatanatyam.

I still clearly remember my first meeting with him in Mumbai. His eyes sparkled as I showed him the various types of Darus from King Shahaji's Prabandhas which I had selected from the manuscripts at the Saraswati Mahal Library, Thanjavur. I was happy to know that he not only had knowledge about the Thanjavur Maratha ruler's contribution to dance literature but also respected King Shahaji and King Tulaja as great musicologists. He said he was aware about the earlier forms of dance compositions and already knew many types of Darus composed by his ancestors. He also had knowledge of many rare ragas like Padi, Gauri, Revagupti and Gummakambodi which are found in King Shahaji's compositions. To my great joy he readily agreed to compose music and choreograph these Darus for me and thus started a very fruitful period of my dance training under Kittappa.

Many a time, I traveled to Bangalore and Thanjavur to learn from him and he also would make it a point to find time for me whenever he came to Mumbai. I took this golden opportunity to learn some traditional varnams, jatiswarams, tillanas, padams and javalis which were compositions of his ancestors. He was a descendant of the great Tanjore Quartet. Varnams in Chakravakam (Sadaya), Ragamalika (Sami Ninne), Kapi (Suma

Sayaka), Khamas (Samini) and the famous Huseni Swarajati (E mayaladira), Purvikalyani jatiswaram in sankirna gati adi talam, Guru stuti in Ramamanohari (his father Ponniah Pillai's composition), padams like Padari Varugudu and Netru Varen as well as javalis like Itu Sahasamu and Yevade Nenu as well as tillanas in Hamsanandi, Dhanashree in rupakam & adi respectively and a rare Kanada Tillana in simhanandana talam are some of the traditional gems I learnt from Kittappa.

A few instances are noteworthy from the point of view of giving an insight into Guru Kittappa's way of teaching and his approach to training.

During the course of training, particularly when I used to leave my small child behind in Pune to go to Bangalore, I would be very eager and ever prepared to absorb as much knowledge as possible. I was ready to take lessons at any time of the day or whenever he found it convenient. I was prepared even if he wanted to teach me the whole day. However, he preferred to teach only a small portion in one session. With my experience of a decade I would hardly take any time learning it. But he would insist that it was all for the day and I would be literally in tears. Years later, I have realized that those compositions have been perfectly inscribed in my memory, so much so that I can recall them at any time and this is only due to the long duration that was given for their assimilation.

Due to my earlier training, my adavus were technically perfect and he never had to correct my nritta. But, at times he would tell me to relax while executing a movement. The tension in the back bone not only makes the movement look rigid and jerky but also puts an unnatural strain on the back bone, he felt. A relaxed attitude also makes it possible to execute the adavus in a leisurely tempo involving a full body swing with curves which bring out the true grandeur of this bani.

Guru Parvatikumar had taught us the writing of the dance notations and whenever Kittappa gave me a lesson, I immediately wrote it down. I wonder whether he himself used to teach this to his disciples. However, he admired my ability to write notations quickly and always encouraged me to do it. In fact, if I forgot to write, he would softly remind me about it.

Over the period of time of this learning I realized that Kittappa had a special method of composing jatis. I remember that during one of his master classes which he was conducting under the auspices of Bhulabhai Memorial Institute in Mumbai, I requested him to teach me only the sollukattus of the dance jatis. He looked at me with that special mischievous look in his eyes and asked me what I would do with it. When I explained that I wanted to find out the principle behind his special way of composition and choreography, he smiled satisfactorily and happily shared his wealth of dance jatis.

I never really learnt any abhinaya from Kittappa Sir nor did I ever have the opportunity to see him teaching abhinaya to his other disciples. Of course, he used to explain the meaning of the words and show different hastas for the words. But I felt that his sancharis came more through his musical expression rather than through body language. To learn abhinaya from him one needed to have a keen musical ear and a sound knowledge of the technical language of abhinaya. One must listen to his singing of padams like Netru Varen (Pantuvareli) or a javali like Sakhi Prana (Senjurutti) to understand this. The musical variations which he developed had a special audio visual quality which is very essential in the rendering of a dance composition.

While choreographing Marathi, Hindi and Sanskrit compositions of King Shahaji he had asked me to give him a transcript in

Telugu (since the Telugu script is phonetic like Devanagari) and translation in Tamil. At times, he would ask me to set the words in the given talam. Since the language of the lyrics was alien to him he was cautious not to break the words or phrases undesirably. He gave a lot of attention to the meaning and rasa bhava of the lyric while choosing the ragas, whenever they were not mentioned in the text of the manuscript. For King Shahaji's ragamalika abhinaya daru in Hindi he deliberately chose ragas used in Hindustani music, like bihag, kapi and Kanada.

He always took into consideration the rhythmic aspect of words present in a lyric. There is a unique composition found in the manuscript of Shahaji's padams. In this Padam there are only two words in its pallavi- "*Pahile Krishna*". What follows are the four charanas with three-four lines which rhyme with different aksharas. Though it was listed as a padam, Kittappa could feel its innate structure resembled the songs from the kirtan parampara and he duly utilized the rhythm and musical notation to suit the same. He has prepared the notation of nine different darus and padams of King Shahaji and I had the honour and privilege to present them before the enlightened audience of the Music Academy, Chennai in 1974. This recital was compered by the then secretary of the Academy, late Dr. V. Raghavan, an eminent scholar of music and dance. While Kittappa himself did the nattuvangam, his disciple Padmalochani, a well known singer and dancer gave the vocal support.

Kittappa had an impeccable sense of laya and his kalapramana never wavered even a bit during the course of a composition. While conducting the programme he controlled the kalapramana so majestically that the dancer had total freedom to concentrate on the dance movements. This gave a feeling of total

abandon, extreme joy and ecstasy which I have experienced many a time.

Through the course of my long association of over a decade with Kittappa I have made the following observations about his bani-his style of choreography and musical perception:

1. In his choreography music comes first. He seemed to see the visual along with the music. So, whenever he choreographed a dance pattern into a musical structure it blended perfectly into it.

2. He gave a lot of importance to the plain rendering of musical notes. He did not advocate unnecessary brigas or the twisting of words in singing. His sangatis in varnams and padams gave utmost importance to the words and its emotional content.

Once while commenting on my choreography of a Marathi varnam of King Serfoji in Adi Talam, he pointed out to me that in the pallavi of this composition the important word and the musical stress fell on the fourth akshara. He advised me to conclude my arudi (after the tirmanam) on the fourth akshara instead of the usual fifth akshara. According to the sastra this arudi (after jati) should normally end with the first laghu in the given talam. But according to Kittappa the impact of the words is more important in abhinaya composition and it should be followed even if it means that you have to take a little liberty with the norms of the sastra. Using the same principle, sometimes he took liberty while singing sangatis for a padam by using prayogas which may not normally appear in the usual exposition of that raga but seemed to effectively embellish the content of the sahitya.

3. His musical renderings for dance may sound a little too simple if you happen only to listen to them. However, in

combination with dance choreography his music takes on quite another hue. In short his approach to dance was like audio-visual music.

4. Guru Kittappa's choreography of adavus was always in madhyama kalam. Sometimes he combined it with the sollus in a faster tempo. His sollus form a beautiful dialogue with the adavu patterns. His jatis, particularly in the varnam, were never too long except for the first trikala jati. It seems quite correct to me, not to include the long drawn patterns of jatis in varnams or swarajatis since, though varnam does strike equal balance on nritta and abhinaya, and it is the emotional aspect or the portrayal of the nayika which needs to come to the fore. The long jatis in between the pallavi and anupallavi lines of the sahitya in a varnam only break the mood and the theme of the sahitya rather than show the demarcation between the lines forming a kind of a visual relief.

5. His jatis never sound complicated but when one starts reciting them with the talam one realises the clever weave of the pancha jatis and the karvais. His patterns of adavus for these sollus look even simpler but if one sees them in dialogue with the jati, the whole pattern starts sparkling like a jewel. In his compositions he used to make conscientious usage of various yatis like Srotovaha, Pipilika, Mridanga and so on.

6. He expressed his philosophy of Bharatanatyam in just few words; "dance should be beautiful to see and to listen." The impact of the beauty which his choreography creates is heartwarming and full of transcendental peace and tranquility, an impact which takes one within and makes one more introspective and aware of oneself.

The passage of time has carried me into the 21<sup>st</sup> century when deep engrossment with my own experiments with Hindustani music have brought me a long way ahead but my link with Thanjavur and Kittappa remains unbroken. The bani still persists. I think bani is nothing external. It is the set of internalized aesthetic principles that enrich the art form. The understanding of the basic principles of Bharatanatyam which I found through my learning with Kittappa is the pathfinder and shall

always remain with me. These principles form an intrinsic part of my new work Nriya Ganga.

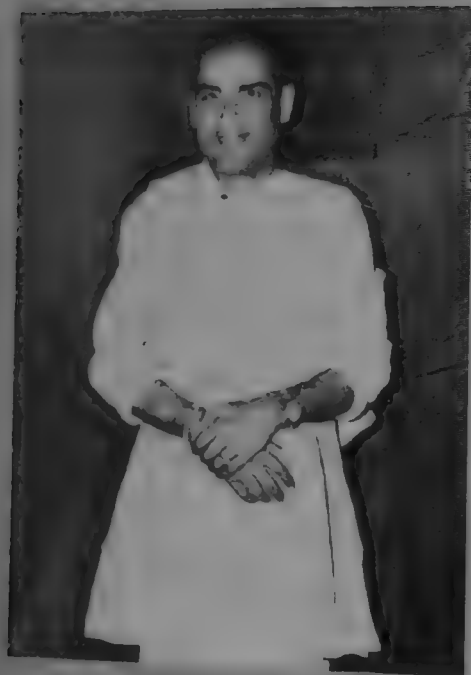
Today, after watching a Nriya Ganga recital when a learned critic publicly pays me compliments for giving rasikas a new bani of BharataNatyam....in my heart of hearts I am in Thanjavur at the feet of my Guru who gave me a true insight into his bani!



**Sucheta Bhide** who learnt Bharatanatyam under Acharya Parvati Kumar and Thanjavur Kittappa, is an excellent teacher and choreographer. Her own experiment of 'Nriya Ganga' has evolved into a distinct style. She is the recipient of several awards -Maharashtra Gaurav Puraskar, State Govt.'s top award for excellence in the field of dance, National Award of Sangeet Natak Academy, for rare contribution & excellence in Bharatanatyam, among others.

## Dandayudhapani Pillai Bani

- Jyothi Mohan in Conversation  
with Jayalakshmi Alva



K. N. Dandayudhapani Pillai  
(1921-1974)

Recently, Shanmukhananda Bharatiya Sangeeta Vidyalaya organised a lecture-demonstration by the veteran dancer, Smt. Jayalakshmi Alva. As she was the first and foremost disciple of the late Guru K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai, I decided that talking to her would throw some more light on her Guru's bani. She has learnt only from him all her life and thus is a repository of a lot of his choreographies. Her bhakti for her Guru was amply evident through the entire evening. Her face was radiant as she talked about him or his work. It was a lesson in Guru bhakti for all the young dancers present on the occasion.

During the lecture demonstration, she reiterated the fact that Guru Dandayudhapani Pillai was known for laya intricacies. She said her Guru wove difficult, complicated patterns into the jatis which were replete with significant kaarvais too. "The kalapramanam of the jatis was of great importance to him. His jatis were very different from those of his contemporaries. The lyrical quality of the jatis made them sound very musical," she added. He used the sollus in a very engaging manner. She demonstrated a few "dingu jatis", where the sollus were like poetry. He played around adroitly with intricate nuances of rhythm leaving the viewer astounded and delighted she declared! She said, "It was very surprising. Guruji would stammer a lot while speaking, but he was very fluent when singing or reciting jatis. There would be a strong flow of swaras or syllables without him ever faltering. Since he was very passionate about creating new jatis, we had two jatis for each line of the sahitya in the varnam".

I had heard that he laid strong emphasis



on development of laya gnanam in the student. When I questioned her about this she agreed saying, "Towards this end, a beginner would be taught only the footwork pertaining to an adavu for days on end. The hand movements would be taught only after the shishya had mastered the rhythmic aspect. Only after the hands and feet were honed to perfection, was the glance and grace introduced", she stated. He was a perfectionist. While teaching us adavus, he would have us hold each posture while he walked around us, looking at it from different angles, so that at any given time, the stance was perfect.

"Apart from laya intricacies, Guruji was known for the rich storehouse of compositions he has left behind for us," said Smt. Jayalakshmi Alva. He felt, there were no suitable varnams for children. Sringara was not appropriate at their age.

nor were they able to relate to the bhakti in compositions. To address this, he composed a varnam, "Annaiyai" suitable for children, in ragam Abhogi. Sancharis were beautifully built around the theme of the father and mother, she added. "This is something that comes naturally to a child and will never look contrived", she explained. His mastery over music resulted in a plethora of varnams, jatiswarams, tillanas and padams, all very beautiful and appealing. "The fact that shishyas of other banis dance them is testimony to his brilliance as a composer," she added. She said further, that many times he changed the pallavi line of the tillana, keeping the latter part constant. Thus for some tillanas like the one in Hindolam, different versions are available. I had read that there were not many sancharis in his varnams and that the focus was mostly on the complicated jatis. She denied that assumption. She said he developed the sancharis in a gradual manner and they did several sancharis for the varnam sahityas. He did not believe in weaving stories into the varnam sahitya, she clarified. Variations done were delineation of the line of sahitya only.

She recounted how her Guru who started off as a singer metamorphosed into a

Bharatanatyam Guru of eminence. She told us that he was a very generous teacher, sharing his knowledge freely with his students. "He would suddenly decide to change the jatis or the order when inspiration struck him, many a time, just minutes before the curtain was to go up!" This reminded me of my Guru Kalyanasundaram, who composed or altered items just as we were entering the stage! She rued her Guru's early demise, saying that he would have accomplished so much more with his creative instincts and we would have been that much richer with his artistic contribution.

Smt. Jayalakshmi Alva's 75 years sit lightly on her. The radiant smile, the expressive face (she demonstrated the padam "Netru varen endru") registering myriad emotions, the twinkling eyes and above all, her devotion to her Guru endeared her to the audience which responded with warmth and love. There was a rich musical quality in her recitation of the jatis which she did with clarity as well as consummate ease. She is indeed fortunate to have her daughter and grandchildren share her passion for her Guru's teachings as was evident throughout the demonstration.

As told to Jyothi Mohan

**Shanmukha Sangeeta Shiromani** awards for 2010 are to be conferred on **Nadaswaram Vidwans Nemmara Brothers** (N. R. Kannan & N.R. Anand), **K. Bharatsundar** for Carnatic vocal and **S. Akash** for Hindustani flute on **19th January 2011.**

## Dandayudhapani Pillai Bani

- Urmila Satyanarayanan

I have learnt from Guru K. N. Dandayudhapani Pillai as well as from K. J. Sarasa, so I have personally experienced differences in banis. The differences in banis though, are suggestive and may not even appear apparent to the common man.



Urmila Satyanarayanan

Vadyar preferred his own compositions. He also handled kritis of the Trinity. I have performed to the kritis of Thyagaraja. I danced the pancharatna kriti 'Sadhinchane' for my arangetram.

Vadyar preferred the pyjama costume. Pyjama was

stitched upto the ankle. The salangai was worn over the pyjama. The 'davani' (pallu) was not a separate piece. The blouse had a kacham (fan) at the centre. Makeup was more or less like what it is now, with a professional makeup artiste in charge.

In K.N.D.'s school the orchestras were permanently present. Even singers like M.L. Vasanthakumari would come to class almost daily. There were three vocalists Abhirami Rajan, Yogam Santhanam and Suryakala, engaged on a permanent basis. Suryakala also took adavu classes. The mridangist Karaikudi Krishnamurthy, violinist Venkatraman, flautist Visvanatha Rao, besides harmonium player Sri Ramamurthy were present almost every day.

Famous artistes like Chamundeswari, as well as cine stars like Manjula, Latha, Jayalalitha and Srividya were senior dancers who would rehearse and perform regularly. It was common to see Srividya playing the veena while MLV sang.

Some of the artistic highlights of KND are

- Created several compositions in Tamil (i.e.) pada varnams, tillanas, kritis, padams, etc.
- Introduced the concept of lengthier jathis.
- Composed several short compositions suitable for children.

Some of the characteristic features of the KND bani as I know are as follows:-

- K.N.D. stressed more on upper body leaning forward.
- Tatti mettu with the knee in front.
- In Tha Thai Thai Tha the feet are brought together in samapadam in every cycle.
- In Thaiya thaiye footwork, only single heel went up, not both heels as done in Kalakshetra.
- In 'Kudithu mettu' adavu arms are held at natyarambham and not fully stretched.
- KND Sir's style had very little or no sanchari in the varnam. Every 'padartha' had two variations which were repeated on the 2 sides. There were no elaborations. The approach was definitely natyadharmi.



Also composed a varnam 'Annaiyai' in Abhogi primarily for children.

- iv. Exceptional at nattuvangam, brilliant vocalist and adept at playing the mridangam.
- v. While talking his speech was hampered with a pronounced stammer. However, his nattuvangam and music had a natural fluidity.
- vi. The publication 'Aadal Isai Amudam', a compilation of his compositions is a treasure trove for dancers.
- vii. Lighter items like the Bommalattam (doll dance) and Therukuthu (street dance) were introduced by him for younger children to perform on stage.

I am not sure if the senior dancers were taught abhinaya differently as they were older. Abhinaya was given as much importance as footwork. It was taught just the same way like the rest of the items. The class had a cement floor which was cracked in many places and a 'keethu kottai' (a room with a thatched roof) with windows on all four sides. Those were some of the happiest days of my life.

At present with dancers pushing the frontiers of age, frequency of performance, intensity of physicality, injury and wear and tear is inevitable. Therefore preparation of the body plays an important role. This can be achieved through exercise, yoga, warm up, etc.

It is important to know music. It enables the artist to internalize the lyrics and emote better.

Students can learn from DVDs but have to be monitored and corrected. Only then will the item look polished. There will be quality of life in the dancers. My personal opinion is that the dancer should reach the stage of optimum experience where her/his creativity and exposure leads to a confluence of banis. This ideal situation would be magical.

It is becoming increasingly common to mix up styles. As long as it is only done as an embellishment, each style will retain its distinctive individuality.

Jugalbandhi, group presentation, inclusion of new songs like abhangs, bhajans etc., is a new trend that has come to the stage. This is a part of growth. The fact that this will replace the margam to me seems far fetched.

KND was renowned for his dance dramas involving several dancers. Senior dancers would play the lead role, example 'Sivakamiyin Sabadam' was created for J. Jayalalitha.

According to Adyar K. Lakshman and Prof. C.V. Chandrasekar, KND definitely hailed from a nattuvanar parampara. Both were of the opinion that he was a versatile artist. KND worked in Kalakshetra from 1944-1948. In fact Adyar Lakshman was of the opinion that the jatis for the Todi varnam 'Rupamu Joochi' were composed by him.

KND was a perfectionist. A very famous film actress had her arangetram at the Madras Music Academy and the chief guest was the Chief Minister of the State. The actress because of her busy schedule could not allocate time for her rehearsals. Vadiyar warned her that he would not tolerate any mistake. On the day of arangetram, sure enough, the dancer made a mistake in the third jati of the varnam. Vadyar stopped the jati and started all over again!

It was a great loss to the world of Bharathanatyam when he passed away while he was still in his mid-fifties. He has left behind a rich legacy of brilliant compositions. He was friendly and loved life, enriching the life of all those who came in contact with him.



**Urmila Satyanarayanan** has trained under K. N. Dandayudhapani Pillai, Kalaimamani K.J. Sarasa and Kalanidhi Narayanan. Since her debut in 1976, she has given several recitals in India and abroad and earned excellent reviews from eminent critics. Titles and awards apart, her dedication to the art is total. She imparts training to aspiring students in her institution Natya Sankalpaa.

#### National Eminence Award

for Lifetime Achievement in the field of Fine Arts for 2010  
is to be conferred on eminent Bharatanatyam exponent

**Dr. Vyjayantimala Bali** on 19th January 2011.

On this occasion, Dr. Bali has graciously agreed to release the

**Shanmukha special issue on  
Banis of Bharatanatyam and Recent Trends**



**T. Balasaraswati**  
(1918-1984)

## The Bala Legacy

- Nandini Ramani

It matters a lot to me to be known as a humble representative of a great legacy and share whatever little I have understood and observed in the sampradaya of my renowned teacher and Bharatanatyam legend, T. Balasaraswati. She was the only Indian dancer considered as "one of the three greatest dancers of the world, along with Galina Ulanova and Margot Fonteyn". It is my good fortune to have been born to the illustrious scholar and aesthete, Dr. V. Raghavan who gave my elder sister Priyamvada, the prime disciple of Bala, and me the great opportunity to study under her.



**Nandini Ramani**

spiritual approach to the art.

The analysis of the legacy of any given Bharatanatyam tradition will have to be based on two major factors- technique and information pertaining to it, transmitted through oral tradition. The technique has two crucial components - nritta and abhinaya and their intricacies. Legacy relates to the term sampradaya; sampradaya matters a lot in the context of the present scene of Bharatanatyam, as it pertains to a serious issue of preservation of the traditional format in its pristine form, as codified by the Thanjavur Brothers.

Balasaraswati believed deeply in the traditional format or the margam-based performance of the Tanjore Quartet which she said, involved the right order and sequence of practice for this art, revealing the spiritual through the corporeal. This format formed the mainstay of her artistic career. Bala's adherence to it given to her by her teacher Kandappa, was a life's commitment that brought her matchless reputation. Her own hard work and genius added further dimensions to her performances. Her choice of items for performance and her faithful observance of the elements of her chosen sampradaya were skillfully done. Her ability to elevate the audience and transport them to a higher level of enjoyment in the real sense while remaining simple and unassuming in performance and humble in receiving praise, were all part of her legacy that richly deserves to be emulated. Her conception and comparison of the Bharatanatyam recital to the structure of a great temple, reveals her devotional and

As a firm adherent of the Balasaraswati style, I wish to focus more on one of the major components-viz. the aspect of nritta, an area which has not been looked into or publicized as much as the other area - abhinaya, in this tradition. It has been imagined as though this style is focused only on abhinaya, not taking into account the firm base and link that Kandappa's technique provided for the process of overall refinement in this tradition. I recall the words of my revered teacher, T. Balasaraswati- "It was the highly aesthetic taste and technique of my Guru Sri Kandappa Anna, which shaped my over-all skill. The way he designed my nritta urupadis gave me ample opportunity to develop in an appropriate manner and to dwell on other areas of the dance form."

An important factor is the approach of Balasaraswati to her art which was based on her unshakeable faith in the training that was imparted to her by her teacher, Sri Kandappa, sixth generation nattuvanar of the Thanjavur Chinnayya

line; Bala's bhakti was actually bhayabhakti, towards all that was handed over to her by Kandappa. In one of her presidential speeches she says, "I have not had the intelligence or the talent to introduce any novelties in it or to dig into its original antiquity". Such was her firm belief and reverence to her Guru and sampradaya.

The kutcheri arrangement of this lineage is a beautiful amalgam of nritta and abhinaya, both enriching and embellishing each other. One can see the parallel representation of all the elements in this style and its gradual development into a natya sampradaya, as mentioned by the great poet Kalidasa in his *Malavikagnimitram*.

In this style, nritta is disciplined within the prescribed adavu groups. Rhythmical segments have a simple set-up, yet, are innately rigorous in nature. They are totally devoid of glamorous movements and postures or glossy, picturesque poses. Firm stamping of the feet, with adavus executed precisely for the rhythm patterns, results in a parallel description of the arrangement through word and sound. At no point of time, has there been a change, deviation, or alternate arrangement of a particular movement in adavus and in their execution. Even at her ripe age, Bala tried to present the same complex adavus in a tirumanam, gearing up all her energy. In nritta, the face of the dancer is to be kept serene and not display a gleaming smile or unnecessary looks to take away the serious approach that goes with this tradition.

Anga suddham, neat arai mandi or basic posture, with the back upright and not protruding, clear hastapada distribution, well-defined adavu structures, kalapramana suddham, rhythmic patterns that contain intricate laya nuances without outward display, nattuvangam technique that is devoid of any show and magic and the clarity and

completion of adavus with firm stamping, each one landing with precision, are all important features of this tradition." These are not only part of the training but are also to be infused into your blood stream during the process of learning" said my own teacher Ganesan, son of Kandappa, and close associate and nattuvanar for Bala for nearly two decades. Both Kandappa and Ganesan, the only inheritor of his father's legacy, were outstanding choreographers in the complete sense of the term, by being musicians, composers, nattuvangers, and mridangam players with good knowledge of languages - all rolled into one as per the norms of the olden times. Their usage of the cymbals, voice modulation, and crisp recitation of the jatis added a unique touch to their nattuvangam and contributed in a major way to the success and uniqueness of the orchestra of Balasaraswati.

In nritta, the structure and nature of each pattern is very compact and crisp without unnecessary embellishments. It contained the essence of the laya - orientation with propriety. The linking of adavu patterns with musical segments forms a lively, co-ordination. There is always a certain leisurely, unhurried approach in the execution of nritta segments, with the feet and the hand reaching out to their destination in a smooth, unbroken process.

A brief explanation on the basic training according to this style is important at this point. The basic adavus start with training-first with feet alone, for nearly two years, followed by the appropriate hand distribution for another one year to make the student totally fit for further challenging work in this sphere. Ganesan chose an auspicious day for the hasta viniyogas, which he referred as kai tookkaradu or raising the hands. There are several patterns of practice mode for adavus, each one deliberated individually and in groups. By the time the adavus,

and a set of poi adavus are completed, the student is expected to achieve a certain standard; if not, she is made to remain there, till she attains that level in a gradual ripening process. Never was anything forced or thrust on the student in the name of hard work and rigorous coaching.

The traditional format or the margam of this style confines firmly to the prescription of the illustrious Tanjore Quartet starting with alarippu, jatisvaram, sabdam, varnam, padams, javali, tillana and slokam. Each of these items was conceived, choreographed and performed with an utmost rigorous, disciplined approach without having any kind of flowery or superficial quality. The intricacies of rhythmical nuances involved in the patterns, their innate beauty enhanced by a firm, yet leisurely delineation of the pure dance, all the while maintaining excellence of the nritta aspects make

for a beautiful visual experience. The choreographical genius of Kandappa and Ganesan was of a high order displaying an extraordinary skill envisaged in smooth execution.

Abhinaya, the most renowned element in Bala's dance, is very well-known to all of us. Every one knew how Bala literally lived that term - abhi-naya, by bringing the sahrudaya closer, through her poetic communication. I will briefly touch upon certain major points about that approach of Bala. Abhinaya here was music visualized. Music followed the abhinaya hastas, both of them enriching mutually; leisurely singing, sangati-oriented or raga elongations blending with the hand and the eyes that follow, to create a

wholesome picture, with an innate beauty were hallmarks of this technique. The hasta mudras are completed, the sancharis extended beyond the word, dramatization is avoided and nritta elements incorporated. Thus a smooth portrayal of the composition in an unbroken chain of enactment, to accompanying music flows like the thaila dhara or incessant flow of oil. Nuances of abhinaya are couched in subtlety and dignity; even in the depiction of srngara, the force of the feeling is intent within, while the dancer's outward display is subdued to suit the stage. Interpretative aspect is developed gradually in stages with propriety, and in apt measure, with suitable elements of natya and, logical

approaches appropriate to the content. Depiction of role reversal in episodic narration is not employed. The abhinaya sequences develop from the main idea to be internalized by the dancer. The process of handling or improvising a particular

interpretation keeps evolving constantly. The networking of the sequences and the interlinking hand gesticulation culminate to give a smooth visualization along with spontaneous interpretation. Direct sessions in abhinaya with Bala were a boon to improve one's thought process over the years. Skill in music to bring about a fresh touch every time and to evolve constantly with one's own background knowledge in the three-fold aspects of natya is the challenge for the dancer in this style. Mridangam accompaniment is soft and supportive to the dance rendition without any dramatized play.

Marabu, or tradition or sampradaya is a



timeless concept. Legends like my teacher Bala, gave life and meaning to it and lived to prove it. The divergent approaches that have been adopted and are still happening in the traditional format in the Bharatanatyam scene will explain the expansion of its territories, when compared with the strict boundary

of the legendary Bala. It would be a fitting homage to Bala and the illustrious codifiers of Thanjavur if every dancer-teacher in the field today adheres to the path shown by such a great sampradayavadin like Bala who reigned supreme for her unswerving loyalty to the margam repertoire.



**Nandini Ramani** is a prime disciple of T Balasaraswati, an art critic and member of various committees connected with dance and music. She writes regularly for reputed journals of dance and music. Daughter of late renowned scholar Dr. V Raghavan, Nandini is compiling her father's literary works and publishing them for Dr. V Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts, Chennai.

**Mahaswami Sangeetanjali**  
will be performed by eminent vidushi  
**R. Vedavalli**  
on 18th January 2011.

*With Best Compliments  
from*

# A Well-Wisher





## Kalakshetra Bani

- Leela Samson



Rukmini Devi  
(1908-1984)

The idea of Kalakshetra formulated as an idea in the mind of Smt. Rukmini Devi after her first concert in 1934 for the Theosophical society. It was a historic moment when the art of sadir was first performed by a woman from a brahmin family, in their premises. This was considered, at that time to be an unorthodox thing to do. Rukmini Devi herself considered it to be a spiritual art form, an art form that every child of India could learn to enhance their knowledge and their appreciation of their own culture. With that in mind, she decided to open a school and named it after her mentor and guru, Dr. Annie Besant. The Besant Theosophical School in Adyar was started in 1934 and two years later in 1936, Kalakshetra was born.

Kalakshetra's work started in Adyar. Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, guru of Smt. Rukmini Devi and the doyen of the Pandanallur bani, blessed the institute with the strong and vigorous form of Bharatanatyam that the Pandanallur Bani is known for. However Smt. Rukmini Devi had taken lessons in classical ballet as well and she believed that it was important to set in place a curriculum and syllabus, in order to teach young children through a set pattern of training over a period of 4 to 6 years.

What is the Kalakshetra Bani? - Rukmini Devi said, "The purpose of teaching the arts is not merely to teach children to dance and to sing, but to be cultured and beautiful people. It is an important difference." Rukmini Devi was exposed to the body technique of Western ballet and had an instinctive reaction to movements



Leela Samson

that seemed cramped or contained. She understood the use of the body and perceived the possibilities within the existing framework. She was also concerned about what people danced to, what the music was like, whether it was the kind of music composed for a particular

viewer or whether it was chosen purely because of its musical merit and excellence.

Speaking of Rukmini Devi's approach to the sahitya of the padams and varnams, Sri Sankara Menon (Smt. Rukmini Devi's successor) in conversation with Ms. Leela Samson for her book, 'Rukmini Devi-a life elaborated -

'When Rukmini Devi began to dance she began to think in terms of composing. Till then, the dance performance as a paddati - a traditional scheme, had been followed by the dancers since the time of Sarabhoji Maharaja. The performances began with an alaripu, jatiswaram, shabdam and varnam, followed by padams and their kind composition's which were not laya-baddham and a tillana. Kautuvams were only done in the temples as a form of worship. With Kalidasa Neelakanta Iyer's coming to Kalakshetra, Rukmini Devi began to think in terms of new items for the dance. Neelakanta Iyer helped Rukmini Devi to correct the tala-structure of some of the traditional compositions. The alaripu, jatiswaram and shabdam were left untouched because they were already formalised. Apart from this, the varnams were beautifully composed. Dance teachers of that time were not all knowledgeable about the literary and linguistic worth of the poetry.'



Rukmini Devi

'Of the four *abhinayas* or expressions of dance, Rukmini Devi changed three irrevocably. The four are *angika abhinaya*, *aharya abhinaya*, *vachika abhinaya* and *satvika abhinaya*. She started with *vachika* or the literary content, the verse, the *sahitya*. Even in regard to the *padams*, Rukmini Devi had no objection to those of Kshetragana; nor the verses from the *Gita-Govinda* of Jayadeva. But she picked the *padams* to which she would dance very carefully. She changed much of the vocal grammar, without changing the grammar of movement. She redid the *abhinaya* portions and the *bhavabhinaya* - that is, the *mudras* and their prescribed usage and the facial expression or mannerisms of the face that were in vogue at the time. She felt that some of what the professional dancers were doing was strictly for those who were watching them or hearing them.'

Particularly sensitive she was because she was teaching young girls. 'Her philosophy of educating young girls in the dance was not to serve this specific societal purpose, but to appreciate the art and its intrinsic beauty for its own sake and for a general public who could be persuaded to appreciate the form as part of their cultural inheritance. If you wished to do this she felt, you must present a refined art and a refined art form needed to have a refined medium. She was convinced that the basic style was very pure; the general structure, the movements and the architecture of the dance - these could not be changed. But she felt, you certainly could decide what expression in words ought or ought not to be used, what expression in gesture and what facial expression you wished to convey to the audience or not. And on all this she kept a very strict vigil and wherever there was something that she thought was not suitably refined either for the young girls performing it or for the general public watching it, she did not hesitate to alter or remove.'

Technique, she felt gave one the ability to do what one willed. Costume, lighting or choreography, though essential to a stage performance, could never cover up for a deficiency in knowledge of one's art. She was sure of this and emphasized it again and again. Yet, she also emphasized that true art mastered technique, and then went beyond it. Thus, in December 1939, while taking an Arts Course on 'The Creative Spirit' she said, 'Keen intelligence, deep powers of thought, quick vision and reflexes, swiftness to grasp ideas and to change them, all these are necessary to the artist because they are instruments through which the emotion itself is expressed. To be a real creative artist, both emotion and intelligence are necessary. In modern times the mind is dominant and artists tend to be clever. Some succeed, some do not. It is not enough to be clever. Clever art is very hard, very painful to watch or listen to, because one has to watch and listen with one's mind. Something that eludes our analysis, something beyond the mind's critical vision - that art has something within it. That is the difference between genius and brilliance. The genius can afford to make mistakes from the technical point of view. The brilliant one cannot afford to make any mistakes, for he has only his brilliance, only his intellect to fall back on.'

According to Sri Sankara Menon, Smt. Rukmini Devi was extremely appreciative and sensitive to technique and believed that the professional dancer was not always refined; nor did she make use of the understatement in dance, simply because that was the way she was trained. The dance directly reflected the needs of a society. It was not entirely the dancers' fault. They were dedicated and adept in their art. They were simply taught to express themselves in certain ways and they did it that way. There was no alternative vision. Rukmini Devi gave new atmosphere to the dance recital, teaching her pupils to dance to what was

'danceable', that which had *arthapushti*. *Sringara* was the *rasachakravarti*, the emperor of all *rasas* and the appropriate *rasa* to be emphasised both in the poetry and in the dance. She had absolutely no objection to that, provided it had *sabhyam* and not *asabhyam*. Many *padams* then in vogue were too earthy and realistic for her sensibilities.

Rukmini Devi did not change the actual itemisation of a Bharatanatyam recital. She stuck to the format not because it existed, but because she believed wholly in the progress of items as laid down by the Tanjore Quartet, as an acceptable and legitimate progress of presentation for the dancer. It was an evolving routine, having a judicious blend of the different aspects of the style, and thus physically satisfying for the dancer. She stuck to the original format, but in each one of these she chose her piece with great care, removing all "commonness" as it were, from the recital. It grew spontaneously out of her nature and the richness of her artistic sensitivity. When she made these changes she had no hesitation in discarding what she herself had brought in, if she thought it was against the genius of the technique! Slowly, as time went by, she gave the dancers a freedom of choice they did not have before. The major changes that she effected came without contemplation. They were impelled by necessity because she found that if she wanted to express certain sentiments or convey the meaning in a song in her own way, the existing items limited her. So, apart from the existing items she incorporated Thyagaraja *kritis* and Gopalakrishna Bharati's verses into her repertoire as well. She did something new not because it was fashionable to do so, but because it forced itself through her artistic nature and because she was able to absorb it into the Bharatanatyam technique without effort.'

As a dancer, there has been no greater sense of joy than in the traditional

repertoire, as handed down by the Tanjore Quartette - four brothers, Ponniah, Chinniah, Sivananda and Vadivelu and followed religiously by the Pandanallur family and their disciples. In fact, all schools of Bharatanatyam practised this format till the sixties, when some dancers of the time chose to break from it and perform 'new' compositions.

A major change that Rukmini Devi incorporated in the dance was in the *aharya abhinaya* or expression in costumes, stage and decor. Her own costumes were a revolutionary change to the existing scenario. Before her time, girls wore *cholis* or blouses and a *pyjama* over which they had a narrow sari tied into a *kaccham* between the legs. This was the regulated costume for dance and every dancer of the time conformed to it. From the point of view of the dance itself, it was quite comfortable. But from the aesthetic point of view these costumes lacked grace. Rukmini Devi studied the scriptures for references to the attire of the dancer. She also studied the bas-reliefs in the temple walls to see how the dancers were draped. These proved of immense help to her in deciding what she would wear. She devised an *aharyam* which has since been universally accepted. Not many people know where it came from, or if they did, they will not acknowledge it. But at the time, she was the first person to appear in a costume totally different from what was worn before.

It is significant that she changed both the *vachika* and the *aharya abhinaya* very early in her career, in fact before her first dance performance itself. On stage she was the first to use dark-blue curtains as a backdrop instead of the painted sceneries that were popular.

Rukmini Devi was busy from the earliest days of starting Kalakshetra, gathering around her a distinguished faculty of eminent teachers. She did not lack the

vision for this but had little to no facilities. The first music teacher in the International Academy of the Arts was Papanasam Sivan. Meenakshisundaram Pillai was assisted in the dance department by his son-in-law, Chokkalingam Pillai. In fact, she was that one pupil for many years and as she gathered eminent musicians and dance teachers, Sanskrit scholars and researchers to the arts centre, her own desire to learn and their enthusiasm to teach her – a sharing in the joy of the traditions they so beautifully embodied and which she recognized and valued – became apparent. Apart from the dance classes and rehearsals, she was an ardent student of Carnatic music and learnt from the stalwarts who came to live and teach there.

She was also the first to move the musicians to a seated position upstage to the right of the dancer, from where they could view the dancer and also, the audience could view them.

Students at Kalakshetra work from 8.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. Practical classes last for about 3 hours a day in two sessions. They also have theory and music classes and their performance in all three – practical, theory and music decide their progress at the end of the academic year. Students are taught yoga, kathakali, kalaripayattu – all of which help to enhance their understanding of the dance. At present, students are also trained in painting, pottery, kalamkari and Tanjore painting. The curriculum includes educational field trips, assignments and projects for students and staff training sessions.

Performing the Kalakshetra *bani* as it emerged, challenges you both as an individual and as an actor. It was and still remains a test of stamina and of character, as much as of knowledge, skill and creativity. Among the styles of Bharatanatyam, the Pandanallur *bani* is perhaps the most demanding. It is true to

say that the Kalakshetra *bani*, goes a step further with its emphasis on correct technique. However, what is repeatedly ingrained into the student is also the practice of the art with a sense of dedication, raising the everyday effort to a higher level of dialogue with a spirit within you. No pampering of the ego in this *bani*. No giving in to the whims of the body. No room for slackness, or an indulged thought. This technique and philosophy allows for an engagement with both the immediacy of the movement, an engagement with the present, as well as a forgetfulness of the self, of crossing the boundaries of time and space. It is what every good dancer and form of dance art seeks.

Rukmini Devi used *hastas* according to the genius of the style and according to her own vision of extended possibilities, but always attuned to it. She thus expanded usage both in number, in content and in manner of delineation and set standards that have influenced the style as a whole. It is a fact though that consciously or unconsciously, Rukmini Devi's treatment of the *mudras* themselves, the body positions and movements used to enhance their message, the tremendous expansion of basic movement vocabulary according to a system of 'unfolding', in increasingly difficult and variegated patterns, the use of stage, the specific use of the spine, the tautness of form, the delicacy of expression – all these may undoubtedly be attributed to her vision, her intuition and sensitivity. She enlarged these three most basic aspects of presentation – the verse, the dress and ornamentation and the content, making them wider in scope, giving a good dancer greater opportunity to effectively represent the style. She renewed, she changed, she added, she composed and she created movements till then not seen on the stage in such dimension, so that today the young dancer has a vocabulary far richer than

her predecessor, the guidelines of a system of learning, and an awareness of the extent, scope and challenge of Bharata Natyam, far greater than seventy years ago.

'The Kalakshetra *Bani*' was a natural evolution – a linguistic expression

translated into movement out of Rukmini Devi's need, out of a desire to express her self in a richer medium. Out of this individual need she enriched the span of Bharatanatyam and continued to enhance its dimensions till the end of her life.



Kalakshetra Productions



Leela Samson

**Leela Samson** is the director of Kalakshetra, Chennai. She did her postgraduation there in Bharatanatyam under Rukmini Devi Arundale. She has recently been appointed the Chairperson of Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi. Leela has travelled extensively, performing at dance festivals in India and abroad. Leela is the recipient of the Sanskriti Award, the Padma Shri, the Nritya Choodamani and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award among others.



## Mysore Bani

- Lalitha Srinivasan

The erstwhile state of Mysore was a great seat of learning and extended patronage to all arts and artistes. Hence the regional tradition of dance absorbed the other traditions to arrive at a continuous stream of dance art in Karnataka. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were many prominent Gurus and schools in Karnataka.

Natya Saraswathi Jatti Thayamma, Mugoor Amrithappa, Kolara Subbanna, Yajaman Kittappa and Puttappa, Nanjangudu Rajamma and Dasappa and many other stalwarts rode the high tide of dance like a colossus.

The Mysore school encompassing all these artistes of the state had a distinct flavor of its own. Jatti Thayamma's school excelled in abhinaya. It was known for the exceptional observance of poorvaranga vidhi. The performances used to be replete with shlokas, ashtapadis, padas and javalis from *Gita Govinda*, *Amarushathaka*, *Nithi Shathaka*, *Mukundamala* and many Kannada compositions of rare beauty. Jatti Thayamma's disciple Padmabhushan Dr. K. Venkatalakshamma, continued her tradition and excelled in abhinaya while adding a brilliance of her own.

Kittana's school was well known to observe palace tradition, temple tradition and social performances. Their repertoire was rich and included Bharatha Choorrike, Prabhanda, Ashtadikpalaka aradhana, Swarajati, Swara Prabhanda, Sapta Taleswari Varnas, Navasandhi Nritya, Ugabhogha, Suladis, etc. unknown elsewhere. The Nanjangudu Rajamma



Lalitha Srinivasan

style carried on by Guru Late Kaushik was full of bhava and fascinating nritya. The Mugooru school was famous for its emphasis on nritya, its various kind of adavus, jathis besides the regular complement of Jatiswara, Varnas, Tillanas, Padas and Javalis.

Bharatharatyam or sadir came to the state of old Mysore at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century or early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not much is known about dance in Karnataka prior to that period. The earlier traditions were almost extinct, but for the abhinaya numbers and sabha paddati.

Chinnayya, one of the brothers of the Tanjore Quartet, came to the court of Mysore and taught the sadir tradition. Therefore, most of the Bharathanatyam items that were performed were compositions of the Tanjore Quartet. The adavus, the items in the repertoire, even koravais or jathis were much the same, but the abhinaya numbers were different, innumerable and special. The court tradition did not encourage display of skill or technical virtuosity as much as it did satvika abhinaya. This was because the court comprised great Sanskrit, Telugu and Kannada scholars and connoisseurs who enjoyed the lyrical beauty of the great composers. Even in the adavus the lyrical beauty of movement can be seen. The Mysore bani was known for flowery hand gestures using alapadmas and katakamukha more than geometrical and linear ones like pataka and tripataka. The tribhanghi was also much used in abhinaya. There are differences in the adavus in Mugooru and Kolar banis which makes the dance look different.



The teaching method was much disciplined and elaborate, as narrated by my Guru Venkatalakshamma. She would go to her Guru Thayamma's house in the early morning and do angasadhana or exercises-bending backwards, while sitting and holding the toe with the fingers, twisting the foot around the body, lifting coins and even needles with the eye lids. Jumping, skipping and buski (sitting and getting up) were some of the exercises taught. After a two hour session, they were allowed time for breakfast and rest.

Morning sessions were devoted to adavus and items, till the lunch hour. After lunch and some rest, they would be taught the music, lyrics and meaning of the abhinaya numbers they were learning. The learning process was spread through the day, instead of just one or two hours, like we know it now. The Ranga Pravesha used to be done in a temple or choultry after three to four years of intensive training, in front of scholars and connoisseurs, mostly in the morning hours. It was not a social event.

Venkatalakshamma in many of her reflective moods spoke at length about the items she performed and described the aharya in vogue at that time. They wore no makeup, nor did they wear artificial jewellery, she said. The Rangapravesha was not a social event to display wealth as it is now, she declared. She smeared haldi (turmeric powder) on her face after an oil bath on an auspicious day meant for her debut. She wore gold jewellery - Jumkhas, armlets and vodyana (waist belt), and of course Kutchu, Ragate and flowers in her hair. She wore a nine yard Benares saree over a satin pajama in a *kucche* fashion and did most of the items of Bharathanatya starting with the Poorvaranga Vidhi. The Poorvaranga vidhi consisted of choornike, pushpanjali shloka, natya prashansa shloka from Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitra* and a Ganapati

Shabda, with jatis along with a prayer recited on Vighnanivaraka Ganapati. There was no melody; it had shollu and recitation only. The dancer had to be a good musician too, in those days and she sang the shlokas of Poorva ranga herself. The musicians stood at the back of the dancer moving along with her.

After Rangapravesha, and a few years of experience in music kutcheris, sitting and doing abhinaya and accompanying her Guru during her performances, she was given a test by stalwarts before being chosen to dance at the court. She performed at the court regularly for 20 long years.

Another interesting occurrence at the court was Jodi mela. This was characterized by two sets of dancers and accompanists standing on either side of the King's throne and performing the same number simultaneously. If they performed with coordination, they would be appreciated and given gifts and recognition. If not, his Highness would stop the recital abruptly, with a lift of his finger.

The Wodeyar King Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar demanded a high standard of skill in his court musicians and dancers and expected them to be creative, to be at par with artistes from other states and comparable to artistes who were invited to the court of Mysore often. The court dancers were also sent to other princely states to perform.

The sadir of the Tanjore quartet got assimilated into the already existing mode of dancing in Mysore, as Chinnayya lived at the court of Mysore for a while. There were certain locally popular numbers like suladi prabandha, gondali and perani nritya which took a back seat as the sadir's influence was very pronounced. But the Poorvaranga Vidhi and abhinaya numbers were irreplaceable and continued to hold sway

over the elitist audiences of the court of Mysore. Thus the lyrics from *Amaru shataka*, *Gita Govinda*, *Kshetragna Padas*, *Javalis* in Kannada and Telugu, *Neeti shataka* of Bhartruhari, *Mukundamala*, poems from *Rajashekara Vilasa*, *Padya*, *Gadhy*, *Choonikes*, etc. were popularly performed.

There must have been a lot of cultural exchanges between Orissa and Karnataka during the life of Jayadeva. Historically, it was a king of Ganga dynasty of Karnataka, who had won over Orissa in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Jayadeva lived in the court of the Ganga King Lakshmana Sena. Hence, the Mysore dancers rendered ashtapadis and shlokas of Gita Govinda much before anyone else did. There are a lot of similarities in hand gestures and movements between Mysore style of abhinaya and Odissi abhinaya. The tribhanga is also employed to enhance the beauty of rendering in the Mysore school.

The 'Natyasaraswathi' title was given to Jatti Thayamma by President S. Radhakrishnan. She was a great artist of Mysore, who used to dance abhinaya pieces from dusk to dawn and was very highly appreciated and in great demand. Her well known disciple Padmabhushan Dr. K. Venkatalakshamma lived till 2002 and taught many of us at Mysore and Bangalore. She served at the court of Mysore for 20 years and then headed the dance department at the Fine Arts College of Mysore University for 9 long years. The abhinaya of this school emphasized the sahitya and sangeetha bhavas with rare and precise hand gestures. The abhinaya was highly stylized and based on suchi abhinaya, padartha abhinaya, vakarthabhinaya and bhavabhinaya, employing sanchari bhavas along the lines of natyadharmi.

*Amarushataka* shlokas, appropriate to the nayika, or situation, used to be rendered before a Kshetragna pada.

Khanda Padyas which indicated the kind of nayika who was portrayed in the Kannada javali came as a prelude to the javali. The jaaru adavus which is akin to the manavi gati of *Abhinaya Darpana*, embellished the javalis. These jaaru adavus enhance the mood of the nayika, resting on the rhythmic cycle of the song of the javali.

There are innumerable javalis rendered by the practitioners of Jatti Thayamma's school. Devaranamas of Saint Purandaradasa, Kanakadasa, Vyasaraya, et al. are also profusely danced. Today many rare writings from Kannada literature and modern themes of new age poets are also expressed through dance. The dance dramas in Kannada have been choreographed from mythology, history, social themes and contemporary subjects.

Padmabhushan K. Venkatalakshamma's disciple, Smt. Lalitha Srinivasan, has added Kannada Varnas, Tillanas and other numbers and carries on the tradition in the name of "Nritya Karnataka". She has also researched and reconstructed the Suladi Prabandha which are compositions in seven alankara talas, composed by the dasavarenayas of Karnataka and has renamed it "Sulalita Nritya", having been awarded a fellowship from Human Resources department of the government of Karnataka. This Prabandha is based on the description given by Damodara Pandita in his *Sangeetha Darpana* of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Many a dance drama has been choreographed in Kannada by Lalitha Srinivasan in classical, folk and neo classical styles. "Kavya Nritya" for contemporary poets' works has also been choreographed.

Guru Bharathakalamani C. Radhakrishna has propagated Yajamana Kittanna's tradition. He and his late wife preserved the century-old manuscripts belonging to Kittanna, who was in charge of 300

families of devadasis, who offered service to certain temples in and around Bangalore. Guru Radhakrishna has brought to light the rare compositions like Taava, Prabandha, Rakini, Swara Pallavi, Swaraprabandha, Scesapadhyas, Ashtachala Natya, Brindavana Natya, Saptataleswari Varna, Ashtadikpalaka Nritya, Pushpanjali, Bharatha Choornike, Aaradhana Shloka, Suladis, Trumadacharjyas and Mysore Sadashivaraya's compositions, Shalya's, Narasimha's, Veena Seshanna's, kriti and tillanas. Many javalis, padas, modinritya, pathanga nritya, jade kolata, etc. existed in this tradition. Chavda Khan's thumris and ghazals were also danced by the Kolar traditional dancers.

Guru Radhakrishna has successfully presented some of these numbers under the banner "Bharathamela". He has also composed and produced dance dramas in Kannada - *Vishakanya*, *Rani Shantala*, *Shakuntala* and a whole margam based on the "Anthahpura Geethegalu" of great poet D.V. Gundappa on the Hoysala temple of Belur in Karnataka.

Late Guru Sri H.R. Keshavamurthy, a disciple of Nattuvanar Gundappa has a 60-year-old institution Keshava Nritya Shala, being continued by his sons and daughter, which has produced innumerable ballets in Kannada, based on Kannada kavyas from 8th to 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has also added many Kannada numbers to his school's repertoire.

Late Guru Koushik came from Nanjanagodu Rajamma and Dasappa's Tradition. He added a lot of innovative numbers to the already existing repertoire he possessed. He choreographed for the Pancharatna Krithis of Tyagaraja and also for Raga Tana Pallavi, as he felt Bharathanatyam was an extension of Carnatik music. He also produced some ballets. He associated yoga with natya and taught a pristine classical form to his

students who carry on his vision and tradition.

Mugooru Jeemma's disciple Madhava Rao is still teaching the school's repertoire, whose forte is nritya. The exercises meant for a Bharathanatyam dancer are something special from this school. The Ekambareshwaru Shabda, varnas and tillanas are rhythmically excellent numbers. Unfortunately very few practitioners remain in this tradition.

Late Prof. U.S. Krishna Rao and his wife Chandrabhagadevi, started their learning with Kolara Puttappa and then later from Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai. But the couple added a lot of strength to the field of dance in Karnataka through their students, teaching assignments all over the world, producing Kannada numbers and dance dramas, having written valuable books both in Kannada and English for the benefit of dance students. Smt. Leela Ramanathan, also a disciple of Kolara Puttappa and later Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, is a prolific writer on dance with a wide knowledge of the subject with her travel experiences.

Today Karnataka's dance scene is very rich and highly active. A large number of male and female students learn dancing, even though very few make it to the top. But the energy in the field is palpable and most interesting. Commercialism is still not too strong here. Dancers and teachers strive to keep the old traditions alive, teaching them with sincerity to their disciples. Younger dancers find the need for newer and contemporary themes and work with intelligence and perseverance, which is a welcome development. The husk will drop off and the healthy grain will prevail for sure.

Most of us, who took to teaching in the latter part of 20<sup>th</sup> century, teach the same adavus, items learnt from our gurus to our students to appear for their

Rangapravesha, after six to eight years of training. Yoga music and theory are also taught at reputed institutions, as all realize the importance of the indepth study in an art like Bharathanatyam. Personally I feel there is very little demarcation between banis. You only see marginal differences when disciples of different schools perform. Earlier no one got to see the dancers of the other schools, but now you get to see dancers from all different banis and also different classical dance styles, and hence there is a lot to learn from each other.

Most of us use stitched costumes (either pajama or skirt) which make a dancer look trim instead of bulky in unstitched saris. For contemporary performances we design simple, tailored costumes, befitting the theme.

Group dancing does injustice to the satvika abhinaya, but gives the opportunity to more dancers, and allows for more creativity in choreography. To be a solo artiste, one has to be very accomplished. The introverted, worshipful nature of our classical arts is now outdated, and group performances have become more entertaining, adapting to the stage and the tastes of the audiences.

As conscientious teachers and custodians of our classical heritage, we have to encourage our students to be solo performers. But choreographing group numbers or modern themes is the need of

the hour. But, I believe that classicality and modernity run parallel to each other and there is always hope for both.

There are many questions which arise regarding several issues in the field. The adavu patterns differ very little from one bani to another, and so long as the kinesthetic and aesthetic aspects are given importance, there should not be much problem. Habits and life styles of serious performers have to be dealt with, and we do advise the students to avoid late nights, outings, watching too much T.V. and compute. I remember my guru Mugoor Jeemma, telling me to eat ragi rotis with butter to get more strength to my limbs.

The problem of education claiming the best of our students has to be recognised. As other professions are more lucrative and the field of dance is very demanding in many aspects, very few with an passion for this art form, pursue it and make it their profession



The electronic media is certainly of great help in certain aspects of restoring, seeing and listening to great artists. But it cannot be used to learn the art. The oral tradition of our country which is unique has great advantages in seeking perfection in the learning of an art, including a lifelong relationship between Guru and shishya, and an inbuilt respect for the arts. May our art never lose the high ideals, humane approaches, faith and self-elevating qualities which have captured our heart.

**Smt. Lalitha Srinivasan** is a dancer, teacher, choreographer and a research scholar. She heads the Nupura School of Bharathanatyam. In addition to the numerous dancers she has tutored, she is the holder of the prestigious Shiromani, Priyadarshini awards at the national level and Karnataka Sangeetha Nritya Academy and Kannada Rajyotsava awards at the state level and was also a fellow of the Ministry of Human Resource Development Government of India.



Padma Subrahmanyam

## Bharata Nrityam

- Dr. Jayashree Rajagopalan

**P**adma opens a new chapter in the history of Bharata Natyam—it was a visual and intellectual treat, wrote K. Bharata Iyer in *The Times of India*, on witnessing her Meenakshi Kalyanam, her first attempt at choreography of a full length dance drama, refreshingly different in approach and handling in the early 1960s! She created a sensation with the style that she had evolved while reviving the lost tradition of the Nritta Karanas of *Natya Sastra*.

My guru, Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, the originator and architect of Bharata Nrityam, often quotes Vedanta Desika's verses in Tamil:

Vellaip parimugar desikarai viragaladiyom

Ullaittezhuditadu olayilittanam yamidarkken

Kollattiniyinum kodenrigazhinum kurmadiyir

Ellattanai ugavadu igavadu en ezhil madiye

"I have only transcribed what the Lord of Learning wrote in my mind graciously as my preceptor; How can I be credited for it? Hence whether it is praised or abused, my mind shall not for a moment swell or shrink"

"The spirit behind this verse has been the spirit behind my work too" says my guru, while talking about her research on the Karanas of *Natya Sastra* and the outcome of its practical application. This speaks volumes of her humility and modesty, but the world is aware of and acknowledges her path-blazing research and contribution to the field of dance. Bharata Nrityam at the outset can be explained as the confluence of the Marga technique of



Dr. Jayashree R.

the *Natya Sastra* and the *Desi* technique of the present Bharata Natyam. It would be of interest to know how this came about.

It was in 1961, when she was a teenager that the karana sculptures in the gopuram of the Nataraja Temple at Chidambaram arrested Dr.

Padma's attention and kindled a tremendous yearning to probe into their mysterious world and bring them alive with movement. She could almost sense a calling from above, as though she was ordained to revive the movements. She had had her formal training in Bharatanatyam in the most systematic way with long hours of rigorous practice from the age of six. After her arangetram in 1956, she was regularly performing, gaining accolades as a star among the young artistes. Her guru, Sri Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai, surprisingly had asked her to assist in training students even though she was only thirteen! Though she had the opportunity of meeting and learning from great dancers, her several questions would either be ignored or snubbed by remarks like "Don't be an upstart, this tradition, just follow it." This intellectual starvation made her restless. The first book that she could lay her hands on was the English translation of Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* by Dr. Manmohan Ghosh. This gave an idea of the art that she was practicing but could not satiate her mind which sensed that there was much more significance to our art. It was at this stage that she sighted the karana sculptures with the inscriptions below each figure in Chidambaram and decided to delve into the study of their technique.

Assisting her brother in his film on

Temples of India, brought her in contact with books on temples, sculptures and philosophy by such stalwarts as Ananda Coomaraswamy, Bharata Iyer, T.A. Gopinath Rao, Heinrich Zimmer and Percy Brown. They opened a new vista before her and brought her under Dr. T.N. Ramachandran, who was heading the Archaeological Survey of India in Madras, for studying the karana figures in the temple sculptures. After completing her Master's degree in Music, from Madras University, she registered for her Ph.D. in the Annamalai University, Chidambaram, to work on "Karanas in Indian Dance and Sculptures".

She travelled to all major temple towns in Orissa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh only to realize that the codification of the karana sculptures in the serial order of the *Natya Sastra* were found only in the temples of Tamil Nadu. The best preserved, with relevant inscriptions below the panels, were in the eastern gopuram of the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram, 81 panels in the first tier passage of the Shikhara, in the Brihadeesvara Temple in Tanjavur, and the panels with the inscriptions on the gopura of the Sarangapani temple at Kumbakonam, brought from another location and placed randomly. Albeit, this brought home a great revelation that till the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Marga technique of the *Natya Sastra* was in practice in Tamil Nadu. But after that it seems to have gone out of vogue. Hence, the dance teachers were not in a position to help understand the practical performance of the karanas. In fact when she met the devadasis living in various towns in the south, they said they had not even heard of karanas, but demonstrated several adavus of *sadir attam* which were not being taught anymore! Although Dr. T. N. Ramachandran gave invaluable guidance in studying the *Natya Sastra* and its commentary, the *Abhinava Bharati* of Abhinavagupta, other related

texts and *Silpasastra*, he not being a dancer could throw no light on the practical aspect. She realized that the practical reconstruction of every karana rested entirely on her interpretation of the *Natya Sastra* in correlation with the karana sculptures, and some early frescos.

The first and most important contribution that Dr. Padma made was to identify the karanas as a unit of dance movements; almost all great scholars had translated them as static poses. The word karana is derived from the root 'krn' which itself translates as 'action'. The sculptures were but frozen moments of the karana movements. The *Natya Sastra* slokas are like sutras carrying more meaning than what strikes the eye. It is only through a thorough study of the *Abhinavabharati* one can understand the full course of the movement, if one is a seasoned practitioner! A Karana is a combination of *nritta hasta* (movements involving the entire hand), *sthannaka* (a static posture of the body), and *chari* (movements of the leg). 108 such *Nritta* Karanas are described in the fourth chapter of the *Natya Sastra*. Each movement had to be tried out in actual practice by using the different postures recorded in the sculptures for the concept of animation of the movement, polishing them with practice so that the nuances of practical value could be recorded. My guru would spend hours in front of sculptures, analyzing the sloka and its commentary, questioning herself till her mind and body got the right answers. She felt she had a responsibility to record it authentically for posterity. The various editions of the *Natya Sastra* and even the inscriptions would have slightly different readings. Instead of getting confused, she would get excited that they offered more interpretations to a single Karana. Endowed with an uncanny intuition and an analytical mind which was strengthened by the spiritual protection

and insight that Sankaracharya Pujyarsi Chandrashekharendra Sarasvati Swamigal showered her with, she boldly broke accepted norms and created history in the field of dance.

Dr. Padma started incorporating her research products in her choreography, synthesizing the karanas into the existing system of Bharatanatyam. She had thus created a unique style hitherto unknown in the history of dance, blending the *Desi* or the regional style of Bharatanatyam (*Sadirattam*) with the Marga or the path shown in the *Natya Sastra*. Here was a style doubly enriched with the neat straight lines and angularity of the *adavus* of Bharatanatyam and the curvaceous hip movements, serpentine arm movements, leaps and extended throw of the legs of the karanas of *Natya Sastra*. These became the characteristic features of her style of dance. The vocabulary of the karanas lent itself beautifully for the *Vakhyartha* Abhinaya, whereas the Bharatanatyam movements easily satisfied the *Padartha* Abhinaya. My guru experimented with this technique in her choreography of solo, group and dance-dramas. This brought a lot of brickbats; critics referred to the style as Padma Natyam! She was criticized as mixing various regional classical forms like Odissi, Kathak, Manipuri and Kathakali. She pointed out that it may seem so because *Natya Sastra* is the fountainhead for world dance. Every possible movement that the body can do has been named and described in the *Natya Sastra*. It was then that she decided to name her style of dance as *Bharata Nrityam*, as she felt that what we are performing is *Nrityam* (dance) and not *Natyam* (drama). The skeptics criticized that a research-backed performance would become too heavy for a lay person, but on the contrary, she has been able to make the most complex ideas simple and understandable so as to reach the last man in the audience!

Delving deep into the *Natya Sastra*, helped her identify the methodology of the basic body training through the exercises (*vyayamas*) prescribed for the *angas* (major limbs) and *upangas* (minor limbs) in the form of *slokas*. Several *vyamas* are similar to the *yogasanas*, including *pranayama*. Hence she has evolved a well balanced pedagogy system incorporating all the *anga*, *upanga*, *sthanas*, *charis* and *asanas* as described in the *Natya Sastra* and the *Sangita Ratnakara* of Sarangadeva (a medieval work that records the changing trends and the *Desi* elements of the period), with their *vyayamas* along with *yogasanas*, *pranayama*, and some floor exercises of ballet. Once the body is toned up like this it is ready to receive any type of dance training. The *adavus* of Bharatanatyam are taught with the etymological meaning of the Tamil terminology. She has evolved a basic system of movements termed *Marga-Desi Samanvaya* which helps the students relate to the two systems which are being synthesized. The Karanas form the final stage of the training for Bharata Nrityam.

Learning of classical vocal music is a must. In choreography, very often the movements follow the rise and fall of the musical notes, giving a quality of visual music. Only if one has an aesthetic appeal for music it can be effectively achieved. *Nattuvangam* with *hasta-kriya*, *kattakazhi* and *kara-talam* are taught. Make-up technique is also taught as part of the course to make the students self-reliant. Other classes in the curriculum include Theory and History of *Natya*, Vedic Heritage (covering philosophy, religion and social norms), Sanskrit, Yoga, and *Namasankirtana*. There is also a separate Teacher's Training Course. It is an exacting syllabus and a lot of hard work is put in by the teachers and the students. She has always wanted to bridge the gap between theory and practice that existed after the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the north and 14<sup>th</sup>



century in the south of India. She wanted to give the posterity a legacy of our culture that they could carry forward with authentic city and conviction. But for this kind of training I would not be what I am today as a representative of the Bharata Natyamband.

The music that she created for Bharata Natyam was unique in that it followed the flow of movements. The gamakas of music would be translated into 'recakas' in dance. Her music would be in keeping with the bhava and rasa of the chosen piece. She brought into practice the Sushkaksharas (sollukattus) mentioned in the Music and Tala chapters of *Natya Sastra*. Her gathis were based on the Angaharas mentioned in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter. The fight sequences in her productions follow the Mandalas as enlisted by Bharata. She did adhere to a regular Margam in Bharata Nrityam presentation too but the repertoire would have lyrics culled from ancient texts not popularized by other dancers. They were from Vedas, Upanishads, *Natya Sastra*, Sangam Literature, Ahamargam texts, and so forth, covering a variety of content, emotion and narrative that would bring people thronging to her shows looking forward for something different. She was the first to use edakka (percussion instrument used in Kerala), Tabla-tarang, and sitar with Carnatic music for her dance. In fact there have been several dance performances without the nattuva talam! The temple sculptures not only inspired Padma to recreate the movements but also the costumes and hair-do.

She was the first to revive the Ekaharya Natya of the Banika style where a single artiste presents an entire Nataka. Her 'Ramaya Tubhyam Namah' and 'Krishnaya Tubhyam Namah' are examples of these. She made bold to depict 'Jatayu Moksham' from Ramayana as a solo, for the overture of Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet". When she performed

it in Russia they gave her a standing ovation saying it seemed as though the music was composed for her dance! She did a similar experiment with "Gajendra Moksham" set to the music of Miagi Michio of Japan when she received the Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize for "her contribution to development and harmony in Asia", and sent the audience into raptures. She felt that Bharata Nrityam idiom lent itself for the choreography of any music in the world.

Pujyasri Mahaswami of Kanchi, Sri Chandrashekharendra Saraswati, had asked her to design a new set of Karana figures, based on her interpretation, for the Uttara Chidambaram Nataraja Mandir at Satara, Maharashtra. There are twin figures of Nataraja and Parvati in every panel; the animation of the movement is shown by Parvati starting the Karana and Siva concluding it, his secondary hands showing the course of the nritta hastas. These have become a permanent documentation of the visual depiction of the karanas on granite along with their relevant slokas from *Natya Sastra* inscribed in the Devanagari script. These sculptures which look very different from the sculptures of the extant ones in India, tally almost completely with the 9<sup>th</sup> century sculptures which she discovered in Perambanan, Central Java, which is the earliest documentation of karanas so far.

She has the proud position of being the only artiste of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who has revived the Karanas of *Natya Sastra* for practice and also to have codified it in a temple after a lapse of almost 500 years. Our institution Nrithyodaya, the Academy of Performing Arts, Mumbai, and Bombay Tamil Sangham felicitated her for this achievement awarding her the title of 'Shatabdhi Nartaki' and decorating her with a diamond bracelet. Feted with such prestigious national awards as Padma Bhushan, and International awards as Nehru Award of Russia, Fukuoka Asian

Prize, she forges ahead with enthusiasm and commitment.

Apart from innumerable articles in almost all research journals, books brought out by her are: *Karanas-Common Dance Codes of India and Indonesia*, *Bharata's Art Then and Now*, *Legacy of A Legend*, *Natyastra and National Unity*, *Bharata Kalai Kotpadu* (in Tamil), *Epic Stories from Natya Sastra*, *Bhagavat Gita for Dance*, and *Kanchi Mahaswami's Vision Of Asian Culture*.

"Padma influenced a whole generation of young educated dancers into going

deeply into the literary tradition of dance.... She remains the only Bharatanatyam or rather, Bharata Nrithyam dancer to have good humor in her dance. A phenomenal actress and a powerful person in the art world today, Padma's music, dance and drama are seamlessly linked to scholarship and performance tradition. All this has found a multi-dimensional expression in Padma Subrahmanyam, an artist of rare and unique sensibility, perception and interpretative virtuosity."

-Discover India- February, 1996



**Dr. Jayashree Rajagopalan** is the foremost disciple of the internationally renowned danseuse, Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam. Dr. Jayashree is also an empanelled artiste of and a graded artiste of Doordarshan. She is the chief examiner for dance in the Faculty of Performing Arts, Pune University. At her dance institution Nrithyodaya in Mumbai, she teaches students in the theory & practice of the art form.

## Teaching Bharatanatyam in Institutions

- Jyothi Mohan



Jyothi Mohan



Class at Shanmukhananda Bharatiya Sangeetha Vidyalaya



Jyothi Mohan has learnt Bharatanatyam from Guru K. Kalyanasundaram, of Sri Rajarajeshwari Bharata Natya Kala Mandir, Mumbai and Carnatic vocal music under the late Sri P.N. Krishnamoorthy. She has been teaching Bharatanatyam at her own institution Sriranjani Kala Nilaya as well as at the Shanmukhananda Sangeetha Vidyalaya. Swar Sadhana Samiti has conferred upon her the title Vidya Vibhushan.



Jyothi Mohan

In earlier days, Bharatanatyam was taught in the guru-shishya parampara, wherein, the former taught the latter one to one. Group classes were unheard of. The guru was held in high esteem by the parents as well as the shishya. After a period of requisite acquiring of the art form by the shishya, the guru would suggest that the parents arrange her debut performance or arangetram. Later, as costs escalated, group classes made their appearance. It worked well financially both for the guru as well as the shishya. This also marked the inevitable falling of standards and exploitation by the guru. The quality of training imparted became suspect in most cases. It was at such a time, that people who cared for the art form, involved cultural organisations like music sabhas and asked them to run classes in natyam and sangeetam. Teachers were chosen with care so that the sabha could be proud of its teachers and the department it ran.

I have been teaching Bharatanatyam to young aspirants for nearly three decades. I was tutoring them at my own institution and was later invited to teach at the Sri Shanmukhananda Sangeetha Vidyalaya. We follow a syllabus which I have drawn up, keeping in mind, inter alia, the duration of the course, the limitations of students learning part-time, etc. The syllabus is comprehensive to ensure that students are imparted with theory as well as sufficient practical information, the objective being that when a student leaves the institution, she is a good performing artiste and an efficient, knowledgeable tutor. Towards this end,

the student should know how to sing the Margam taught to her as well as be able to do nattuvangam for the items learnt. This is somewhat difficult for those children who are not native South Indians and therefore are not familiar with Carnatic music, and do not have the time to attend a class for sangeetam.

Hence, explaining the tala structure, kala pramanam, etc., is a challenge.

Institutions which offer professional diploma or degree courses have older students who have decided on a career in dance. They have students who are serious about the art form and hence article is not about these institutions. I shall focus on the situation in institutions running part-time courses in Bharata Natyam.

The difficulty in classrooms like ours lies in the fact that anybody who enrolls to learn is admitted. This can be counter productive, as those with passion for it, those with aptitude for dance as well as those with no interest or feel for dance are all clubbed together. Added to this anybody above the age of seven years is eligible for admission, with no upper age limit. So I have, in the same class, little children whose bodies have to learn to balance, whose stamina is usually low and attention span very short, alongside slightly older children whose grasping power is much quicker, are more serious to learn the art and are willing to put in effort to practise. In addition, a lot of older women join up, as they were keen to learn natyam in their childhood but had no opportunity to do so. Some want to resume natyam as their children have grown up and therefore they can spare

the time and finance. But I have found that this last group, though highly motivated, does not achieve much as the enthusiasm is not matched by ability, mainly due to physical limitations. It then poses a big challenge for the faculty to keep the interests of the middle group alive, while encouraging the tiny tots and the older age group. There is the syllabus to cover, preparations for the mid-term and annual exams as well as school performances. So, the senior students are expected to help ensure that those who need more attention are coached after the day's lessons are done. This way, not only is the progress maintained, but this teaching also helps the senior student gain valuable experience in becoming a patient and good teacher! While teaching, their posture and angasuddham improve tremendously, so it helps them too.

In the present day world, much importance is placed on scholastic achievements. Hence it is common to find that children discontinue dance for a few months, prior to their board exams. In such cases, it becomes necessary for the faculty, to find time to coach them when they return and get them ready for the dance examination, which is a must if they have to move to the year ahead. During the year, children absent themselves for all examinations, vacations when they travel with their families, etc. It becomes the responsibility of the faculty to ensure that the absentees are brought on a par with the other students. This is a time-consuming effort for the teacher! Since the emphasis at home is always on school work, children rarely make the effort to put in practice at home. Since we have to cover the syllabus, it becomes imperative for the faculty to get the students practice in class and then move ahead with the new lesson, something unheard of during our times.

#### The repertoire taught in Institutions

should be such that it caters to a wide age group. Since many are below twelve years of age when they are taught the varnam, care is taken to ensure that the sahityam is more bhakti-oriented, a concept more easily understood at that tender age than a varnam steeped in sringara. Similarly, padams and javalis cannot be taught to very young children. The literary meaning, context and the sancharis have to be explained clearly. The mythological background of the stories employed in the sancharis has to be explained, as most students are not aware of them. When the number of students is large and more teachers are appointed, it is essential to see that the teachers appointed follow the same bani. This ensures consistency in the training and there is no confusion for the student arising from conflicting styles.

The biggest problem faced by these dance institutions is the dropout rate. Huge numbers join on Vijayadasami day, but a few months later, the strength of the class drops. The misconception that eager children initially have about natyam stems from the large number of dance shows on television, which are far removed from classical dances. When they see the effort involved, they balk at the prospect of sweating it out and beat a hasty retreat! To avoid this, I ask the parents as well as the wards to attend a couple of sessions and watch from the sidelines, the art they wish to learn, so that there are no surprises later. Thus, only those who like what they see, join. Of course, some have genuine difficulties with their knees, etc. and quit after trying it out. It becomes necessary, to make the lessons easy initially, by alternating basic theory with the basic adavus, in order to keep interest alive. It is also desirable to pace out the lessons so that the students do not find the initial going painful. Making them dance as duos with the rest forming the audience helps give them a little confidence as well as enables the

teacher to pay individual attention. The fact that there is an audience watching prompts them to raise their pain-bearing threshold. By themselves, they would have given up much earlier.

The advantages of learning in an institution are many. Training is systematic; progress of the student is gradual but regular, as professional imparting of skills is the norm. Pedagogy is taken seriously so that there is no imbalance in the training. Most youngsters thrive in a competitive environment these days. The exams, prizes, etc. motivate the children to study theory and practise for the exams. Most children are regular in attending class as they dislike lagging behind their classmates. Learning theory is usually boring for children who are burdened all day with school lessons and tuitions. But they enjoy learning theory in a group and when each child recites the slokas etc. it becomes revision several times over, without any additional effort! They are motivated to practise when they watch their peers performing better than them. When they learn singly, in the guru's home, unless they are passionate about the art, the drive to learn and hone their skills is usually lacking. They are bored with the mundane basic lessons and generally quit after a while. They also are very reluctant to study theory. For these children, institutional training works very well. They also develop the confidence to perform before an audience, if the faculty makes each child dance alone before her peers. These children, I feel, are more at ease on the stage than those who learn singly. In institutions like ours, the talented children are given an opportunity to perform before a knowledgeable audience in the Talent Exposure Programmes. This is a big plus point, as a platform to showcase talent is sadly lacking, especially for those who cannot pay Sabhas to sponsor them. Institutions like ours also have a good collection of

videos of maestros and senior dancers, which the students get to watch. The Sabha has programmes of all the top artistes through the year, which the students are allowed to attend, thus adding to their knowledge of the art form. The library stocks books and periodicals pertaining to dance which the student can avail of. Lecture-demonstrations are held for them, involving them in a part of it, thus adding to their interest. The parents are also made aware of what their wards are learning and become aware of the rich art form. Since the fee structure in institutions is nominal and scholarship is given to the deserving, the poorer sections of society can also learn Bharatanatyam. I can proudly say that our institution has several students from the economically weaker section of society. Hence, natyam is not for the rich alone. By enriching their lives we are giving back a little to society. Competitions held by institutions attract great participation and children can see where they stand amongst those of their age-groups.

Teaching in institutions has its rewards. The teacher needs to have a lot of patience, good skills in public relations besides having the ability to constantly improvise, depending on situations. It is the teacher's sensitivity that makes learning natyam an exciting journey in which the student discovers her potential rather than being just a boring routine. Since the remuneration in institutions is a fraction of what one makes in private classes, it attracts only those who truly love art for art's sake and want to give back something to dance in return for all the pleasure they received from it. The management in these institutions needs to recognise the yeomen service rendered by such teachers and reward them for their zeal and hard work. This will ensure that the standards at institutions remain high and attract the best of talent in the field to achieve them.



Rajyashree Ramesh



Class In Progress

## Teaching Bharatanatyam Abroad

- Rajyashree Ramesh

Teaching Bharatanatyam abroad is the theme of this article. However, at the outset it may be necessary to establish the fact that experiences gathered in teaching Bharatanatyam outside the shores of India can be varied depending upon where one is. They can at the same time be similar to teaching the dance form, in general, in certain aspects. So the readers might find differences, but also similarities in their own experiences if they are teachers or students.

Firstly, with regard to similarities: It is the nature of this dance form and, if it has to be transmitted based on its uniqueness, it is a challenge. The body of knowledge it carries is in a way unparalleled. It needs time to mature, patience and perseverance and a strong conviction to believe that it will eventually root itself as knowledge in every practitioner, even if all may not master its outer forms. It means giving everyone a chance to learn it if they want to. On the other hand this very aspect could lead one to being carried away into realms that may not enable an effective transmission to a novice. How often do we hear: Oh, she or for that matter he cannot learn it! Yet it is so charming, glamorous and enticing, a stage art that fascinates and brings joy! It means that it will also draw the ones looking for quick results. Not that those participants would not learn properly. But these two standpoints cause friction. It is a challenge for the teachers, because it means to clarify for what purpose one may want to transmit the dance. For the students it means there will be friction in the group. So recognizing and



Rajyashree Ramesh

establishing what we have at hand as the material that is being transmitted and balancing it between its extremes is one of the biggest challenges perhaps for every teacher. Are we teaching a glamorous glossy stage art or a knowledge bank? And because we believe that it is essentially the latter, but

could entail the former, are we making it inaccessible in today's world? An because it is the former, do we succumb to its outer form only? Unfortunately, and perhaps everyone will agree with me, the main problems are faced essentially because of the former and because of the pressure of wanting to perform – my child vs. your child, why she and not I; why only ten minutes, and so forth. The ones who learn fast do not want to learn with the ones who need more time; they won't even talk to them or come to class properly. It is strange how such a situation develops and shapes personalities. On the other hand the ones, who need more time, mess up the performance eventually if you put them on stage, because the others are going on stage. Then there are ones who are not just made for stage. They forget what they learnt, are nervous, or cannot master it enough because their body just won't do it. But they are at the same time learning diligently and sincerely. And we, having a duty towards the art and a duty towards our spectators also, because the art should be presented properly, won't put them on stage, ever. How do we deal with such situations? These are the questions that seem essential in dealing with Bharatanatyam, and every experience with it, means dealing with these questions. They are therefore no different

when teaching abroad even in a non-ethnic community, though certain aspects might not stand out. But nevertheless there are some points which one becomes more sensitive to when teaching such a community and I will come back to that further below where at the end, I shall write all the good things!

Secondly, about the experience being varied: the experiences I shall be discussing here are very specific for the geographic region I am writing from, and also specifically for the country I am writing from. In as much these experiences are shaped by vritti and pravritti and could be different from what someone would have gone through elsewhere in the world. Here there isn't a large ethnic that has intra-ethnic activities, at least where the Indians are concerned. The Indian community, small as it is, does not represent the kind of population that would want to learn Bharatanatyam necessarily. Of course, there are exceptions, but too small to be relevant. On the other hand, there does, of course, exist a non-Indian community, the larger population, where there are people who want to learn it. Therefore this is the kind that one finds in class most of the time. And even teaching them is different in each European country, depending upon whether a native dance culture is prevalent or not. There are, therefore, issues, which make a difference. For example, there are no wonderful success stories to write home about by way of arangetrams. They are an exception rather than a rule. Nevertheless it is this unique status, this place of being in between which shapes experiences differently, that I will be writing about. The major challenges are studio space, where do we stand and how do we teach in a culturally different setup, and of course last but not the least the ups and downs of teaching. I will tackle these issues one after another below.

### The first and major issue – studio space:

This was and is even today the greatest problem. Well-meaning advisors in India would ask why I could not use my garage, because XYZ does that abroad. Unfortunately it is not that abroad here. Most of the spaces are in apartment buildings. I can write a whole book just on these experiences of often having the police at the door because neighbours complained, or neighbours angered and unable to bear the noise. I must concede, we do make a lot of noise with our feet. So teaching Bharatanatyam is always combined with the question, where?. Looking back at it, I just cannot believe that we danced at a participant's apartment on the second floor at the then most holy hour for Germans, Sunday 4 p.m. – coffee and cake time with the family. Anyway, the neighbours downstairs were great, because the participant had told them it was all about culture. They would just go out for a walk at this time and let us stomp around. However, as much as people may try to help us, the real problems begin when looking for studio space to take regular classes. Ground floors don't mean anything. Nor ballet or other dance studios. In summer, we cannot open windows, because even if it is not a residential building, the noise is carried across the courtyard to adjacent buildings. Often people can't believe that a pair of feet can make so much noise. It sounds like someone is breaking the walls. Wooden floors add to it. If it is a residential building there is an added problem. It is strange how this noise drives people crazy, literally up the wall, but they often show it by knocking on the walls – it starts with the first 'tai' and 5 minutes later I can be sure somebody is walking right into class all agitated and fuming. And people here are mostly sensitive to noise levels, unlike in India. Even the most patient landlords and neighbours would request us to leave after a few years. Thus, even if there have

been many supporting organizations, and I must add here, the best support that we living in Europe get is from the local authorities, institutions or a small discerning community, many ventures had to be given up because of our feet. Also this kind of support does not allow a commercial enterprise, so we cannot charge fees, if we use the rooms. A lot of ideology and perseverance is required to survive the pressures.

### Cultural differences:

Dance is not the culture of every country and it shapes not only one's ability to be able to move, but also where it stands in the cultural setup. Across Europe the status varies. While in certain countries it is the most natural thing, in others there is a longer tradition of dance being one of the major art forms practised and thus prevalent. And then there are others where it does not have a predominant place in the public sphere. Of course, ballet, as the established form, is found everywhere, but in varying degrees. Therefore, the acceptance for our dance also varies. It ranges from extremely great interest to utter lack of knowledge or interest. Germany for example is traditionally a country for theatre and music. Though dance as ballet has been there, and it was the country where Ausdruckstanz, expressive dance, was ushered in, it used to be very surprising for me until recently that in the today's events column of all newspapers there was no separate listing for dance. Today, however, the contemporary scene has finally emerged strong and pervasive and its propagators are making sure that dance finds its place in the society here. However, there is a strange opinion of love-hate for Bharatanatyam there, often still being considered rigid and non-creative. Even our contemporary work is difficult to impress them. We are not radical enough. So participants, from this dance scene, though wanting to learn our araimandi technique, are rare in classes.

Also all art that is not European is considered unfortunately a folk art. Dance of India is anyway for many, at least in the popular understanding, something very exotic, often compared with oriental dance. There is a fascination at that end for it. But participants who come from such a background, and often they are the ones who show up, don't last more than a few classes, (in this case because of the araimandi), an experience I have had consistently for 30 years. So we kind of hang in between. However I don't get such participants anymore, because of one major factor, which has changed everything in the recent years - Bollywood. It fulfils their image of exotic dancing, or how the image still lingers in popular understanding. A new history of teaching dance abroad is being written. Or probably not, it has only shifted. They are getting what they want! The opinion among colleagues differs. Classes are full if it is offered, so there are financial concerns too. The ethnic community has completely stopped learning or dancing Bharatanatyam. Now the non-ethnic is doing the same. Bharatanatyam does not have to be everyone's cup of tea, but a reductionism to just being exotic, because of an old image that Europe still holds of India, is something that should be taken seriously and tackled with responsibility. Of course there has always been a small yet discerning section of the society which knows about our classical art forms, at times more than what the ethnic community knows about Bharatanatyam. And they take a very intellectual stance and enjoy it. However, often only as excellent spectators, an audience that relishes - the learned who know how to relish like Bharata postulated. Such a socio-cultural background provides the backdrop for teaching in Europe. However, it also makes one reflect on the essence of the art: the 'what' and 'why', apart from the 'how'.



### The actual teachings situation:

Thus we have participants coming from all kinds of backgrounds – from doctors to actors to computer engineers, 6 to 60 years of age. Often they get fascinated after attending a workshop or class and stay. The ones wanting to learn Bharatanatyam only often fall prey to item-based learning and all that which goes with it. But such an approach does not work here, because mastering an item needs more time and regular classes, which, because of the afore-mentioned problems, are often difficult to offer. Others come searching for Bharatanatyam, because of an intellectual pursuit and interest. They then become even more ideological than we who are teaching them. However, I find it easier teaching today than thirty years ago, because there is more movement in their bodies. But I cannot but notice the large difference it can make if a society is in general a dancing or non-dancing kind. Also I get to see the difference across Europe. In Germany, because of their intellectual stance, one has to approach them 'through the mind'. They need to know where every foot and hand should be and they follow it carefully and full of concentration. Therefore the *angasuddham* effect is very good. One cannot teach by showing the movement, but explaining it. Elsewhere, they just move right away and can follow a movement by just noticing it. But they can just as quickly overlook all corrections and forget what was taught. One aspect that is common everywhere, however, is that participants often come out of interest and sheer curiosity, try it out for a short while and go away. Therefore, there is constant fluctuation and the concern about how to continue classes. Many colleagues have stopped teaching because of it. But I must say that having such participants, who come because they are interested and not because their father or mother wants them to learn, is a completely different experience. They

concentrate in class sessions, there is interest both in theory and practice, i.e. they come to move and don't just slouch around. Of course, teaching bodies which have different movement experience stored in their memory require a different approach. Not adavus are alphabets in such cases, but the *sthanakas*. Therefore the beginners' phase is the longest. Also one should not forget that they are adult participants and not children. Unlike in an ethnic community, where one can expect children, in a non-ethnic community, children in class are an exception. Therefore teaching first and practising afterwards cannot be employed. Every movement has to be prepared for with specific exercises and yoga, practised under supervision, because the perception differs. And I believe that this is an important issue, especially in cold countries, because wrong movements can lead to injuries. On the other hand, if practised properly, even a 55-year-old can hold an *araimandi* well. It gets hard for the kids at times. But still segregation is not possible out of sheer organizational problems.

Where *abhinaya* is concerned, there is generally a great interest in it. The meaning of the song has to be given word-by-word and then with all the contextual background information. But I must say that because those not with an Indian background think they don't know such contextual background and need to learn it, they are in the end effect better equipped with the meaning of the song than some of the ethnic participants. Also, they attend all theory classes or workshops offered. It does not mean that they can show all expressions without a problem. It is another story and needs varied approaches. Not *padams* and *javalis* work, but imagination, creativity and accessing emotions. We in Bharatanatyam have very specific aesthetics and ornamentation. Expecting them to be able to perform these

movements naturally won't work. Even ornamentation has to be taught. For my own part, as a movement analyst, I have developed a methodology to help them access for example, their eyes or the subtle *sundari*. Of course the ethnic participants sometimes do movements spontaneously or an expression comes to them naturally. But the non-ethnics accept that it is so and are not upset, if there is good social interaction in the group; at least this has been my experience. Of course, there are the really good ones, the real talents so to say, in whose body movement and how it needs to be presented are just there. Such talents can be found from an Indian as well as a non-Indian background.

All this makes teaching experience a learning process too. Bharatanatyam becomes what Bharata postulated in the first chapter of *Natyasastra*. It is not exclusive and elite. It is for everyone. There are no pre-fabricated items, all ready only to be learnt and performed. They don't just sit well, if they are performed without knowing what they are constituted of. Unfortunately all problems arise because of items. Moving away from them, and that has been my experience, makes everyone, whether Indian or non-Indian participants, become sensitive about that what the essence of dance is, namely movement and expression, we have such a well-laid system of just these

aspects. So, drawing their attention to these makes them appreciate it, because it makes a difference as to how they feel it in their bodies first. However, like I said at the outset, whether the outer forms appear well-mastered is a different issue. But the message is that they have learnt what it is all about. As such it becomes a personal experience, an aspect that gets forgotten at times when looking at it only as a stage art. Also, with those who survive and bear with me, albeit studio space problems, groups breaking up, etc., class sessions become an active and dynamic interaction, the results rewarding. Happy students, neat lines, commitment to dance, an in-depth interest and, above all, a sincerity, which I cannot claim one finds everywhere. And, of course finally, then accessing items as well. However we have to keep constantly telling ourselves that we are not in Chennai, Mumbai or another Bharatanatyam hub. We do not always have an audience for these items, or for solo performances. One has to live with it. Out of the fluctuating groups, the persevering stay and then dance stays with them for a long time – 10, 20 or more years. Hence, teaching abroad depends upon how one approaches the material at hand. All this might sound very ideological. But that is the nature of this art. There is an ideology behind it, however made for mankind.



**Rajyashree Ramesh** is a senior dancer, teacher and choreographer, who has performed solo and with an ensemble for a variety of cultural organisations in India, Europe and the US, has launched a special training programme for students of non-Indian origin to learn the art of Bharatanatyam at her Academy for Performing Arts in Berlin. With her dance ensemble 'Rasika', she has been choreographing and presenting traditional and multinational productions with universal themes.



Lord Nataraja



Lord Nataraja

## Group Choreography

- B.Bhanumati

"Creativity is not Creation,  
only the Creator creates;  
Creativity is the  
rearrangement of known  
elements into  
New Patterns"

- Anonymous



B. Bhanumati

The variety of movements, from the highest of *utplavanas* to the subtlest batting of the eyelids is such that it would be pretentious on our part to believe that we can create anything truly original as far as our exposition of *Bharatanatyam* is concerned. The above quote expresses this very aspect of *Bharatanatyam*, which is a gift to us from the Creator.

It is perhaps a quirk of fortune that human creativity sometimes springs from the depths of depression. It was seventeen years ago that it happened, just a few months after the sad demise of my beloved mother – my main inspiration and reason to take to dance – when I was at a complete loss as to what would happen to me. A panel discussion I attended dwelt at length on the gloomy future of classical dance, perhaps due to the continuously thinning audience for *Bharatanatyam* performances. To add fuel to the fire, an offer for a cultural programme came my way and the simple and polite request was for "anything except *Bharatanatyam*". It struck a chord in me! Why would anyone say something like this about the most divine art form of all? It set me thinking.

A live programme of Russian ballet that I happened to see did it. I was awe struck by the fifty dancers, rows and rows of them, all of uniform height and figure, performing in unison and synchronised

split second accuracy. There was a relatively limited variety in their movements and I felt that if the beautiful movements of pure *Bharatanatyam* could be harnessed and performed by a group of dancers to such accuracy, it would perhaps raise the level of communication without

making demands on the viewer to have a deeper knowledge of the idiom. In a sense it seemed to me that it may have a better reach for the common viewer.

This was where the journey began.

### The Approach to choreography:

It was not as if I was putting a number of dancers on stage to do identical movements as multiple images of one dancer. It had to be different. Variety was the key and using the powerful idiom to bring out the kaleidoscopic potential of the art form became the focus. It was therefore important to exploit the beautiful lines that *Bharatanatyam* provided.

As the concept evolved, a few things became clear. The easiest for me was to choreograph the crisp *jatis* of my Guru Dandayudhapani Pillai with a group of dancers. I started with four of them, all of different heights and figures. With rhythm dictating the accuracy, all I had to do was to re-choreograph them with no change in any of the *adavus* to make formations and patterns out of them. To weave them into an item I chose Saint Purandaradasa's piece "*Chandrachooda ....*" With ample scope for drama, narrative and many characters, it gave an opportunity to all the dancers with good effect. There was

overwhelming response to the maiden recital from both connoisseurs and lay alike which vindicated my idea of the effect that group choreography would have. It was indeed with live orchestra. One dancer or more. When the piece began I was wondering why you selected this piece which has already been battered by most Bangalore dancers, but as it unfolded I was truly wonderstruck....."

It was like a shot in my arm and I decided to move on with it.

All this meant more rehearsals for programmes and many, many more sessions of practice during choreography. My dedicated group of students and artistes rose remarkably to the occasion. Practice sessions would start at 9 pm and end at 1 am or 2 am and that too, for weeks on end for each programme.

It seemed like a magnificent obsession for each and every member of the troupe and that is why it turned out like it did. It was testimony to the devotion to the art by total family commitment from parents, husbands and wives alike.

I used the lines of Bharatanatyam with basic geometric patterns. For example, if six dancers did the naat adavu, tha tei tha

ha or kuditha mettadavu or any other adavu where hand movements create angles, the overall effect was of a hexagon. From the same positions when the same six dancers move in adavus with circular hand movements, like the periya adavu or tha tei tha adavu, the effect on stage is that of a circular pattern. When the dancers move in adavus with outstretched hands it creates the pattern of a wheel with spokes. I sought to exploit this pattern to the fullest extent in terms of the variety possible. The same became applicable to triangular, square and patterns of other geometric shapes. We then had lines, diagonals, triangles which were also dynamic, that is, in constant movement. As these were explored the spectacular variety that unfolded seemed limitless. I could get two groups to move in opposite directions simultaneously across the stage in any direction, side to side or diagonally. I could devise V-formations, W-formations, U-formations, criss-cross and undulating movements.

I could get two groups to move in opposite directions simultaneously across the stage in any direction, side to side or diagonally. I could devise V-formations, W-formations, U-formations, criss-cross and undulating movements.

The Poorvaranga Vidhi of the Mysore Palace Tradition was an item in which I



used a variety of entries and exits. I had to use the various adavus by having the dancers take positions, switch positions, leave and enter the stage with quicksilver speed and precision.

The brisk pace in Nritta always had an element of surprise in it and the arudhis and the freezes at the end provided a stunning spectacle. With the luxury of six, sometimes eight dancers I could create arches, temple gopurams, pyramids, etc.

The variety seemed unlimited and I could use the entire stage effectively so that the audience got an eyeful at all times. All this was done while executing the standard and pure Bharatanatyam adavus. There was to be no compromise on this aspect.

When a sahitya sequence was expounded, a tableau created by a few dancers on the subject was also shown in an appropriate location on stage and this enhanced its effect. No more than two dancers standing close together had to do the narration in perfect coordination and synchronization. Here the practice had to be so thorough that the dancers had to be in totally perfect sync. The level and angle of a dola hasta, the angle of tilt of the head, the angle of the Sachi drishti, the length of each stride and the extent of each slide had to be absolutely identical. Not so when a solo dancer performs, but no

go when it is a duo or group. The attention to detail seemed to have its effect and it became a mandatory part of the choreography to follow. The krithi "Thanigai malai vaazhum Kumaresa" composed by Isaimani L R Lakshmi, my mother, provided more scope for additions and refinements. Along the same lines followed the Pushpanjali, Jathiswaram, Annamacharya Krithi Jayajanaki Ramana and the Thillana. It was in a sense the first phase in my group choreography, which saw a hundred programs in the first four years, almost entirely by mere word of mouth publicity.

The greatest challenge came when I chose sahitya-based compositions for interpretations. My first attempt was Saint Tyagaraja's Vidulaku a unique piece in praise of music, which was never considered a piece for dance, until then. Here the sahitya predominantly has only the names of Gods strung together. To this I added the mantrapushpam to elaborate on the word Sama Nigama and the Aarohanam and the Avarohanam of Mayamalavagowla to elaborate the word Saptaswara. I could, with seven dancers at my command, depict Goddess Lakshmi emerging from the lotus, Lord Shiva with his prabhavali of Agni, Lord Vishnu majestically astride Garuda and the seven dancers individually depicting each





of the ascending swaras with the diagonal stretch of the hand upwards, one leading to the next and vice versa for the descending swaras.

I now needed to take a hard look at the endeavour to take it to the next level. The idea of choreographing an entire piece in a single hasta- the anjali hasta, came one day when I saw my entire set of students in dance class doing namaskara or the bhoomi pranama. Selecting the Mallari, using six dancers I choreographed it ensuring that the dancers both individually and in combination used only the anjali hasta. I created movement, freezes, patterns, adavus, formations by moving the hasta stretched above head, forehead level, eye level, chest level and sideways, downwards etc. (pics: [mallari2](#), [mallari4](#), [mallari5](#))

Likewise creating the effect of the gigantic Kalinga spanning the entire stage, the depiction of the avatars of Matsya, Koorma, Varaha, Narasimha, Kalki out of the dashavatara, provided scope for effectively using the group. (pics: [visnu](#), [visnu-adishes](#), [kalki](#), [kalinga](#))

However, choreographing the Bhairavi Swarajati of Syama Sastri 'Kamakshi Amba' was by far the most exhilarating experience spiritually speaking. Using a fifty-year old recording of M.D.Ramanathan, we worked for about a month at a stretch three hours a day to bring out the spirituality filled in it by Syamasastri, with a group of three dancers. The depth of devotion that the



piece is soaked in provided a great challenge for interpretation through the dance idiom. We are very careful in choosing occasions for performing this piece, reserving it mostly for connoisseurs of Carnatic music.

#### Some Important aspects:

- a) **Live music:** Since getting even a small item right in group choreography requires several hours of practice, it is impractical to have live music, although it is most ideal for a Bharatanatyam recital.
- b) **CD:** Though the ideal choice, even here the risk of interruption due to power outages/fluctuation/instrument faults cannot be ruled out.
- c) **Availability of dancers:** You need to have a large a backup of trained and accomplished dancers to ensure availability of six of them for every program.
- d) **Stage dimensions:** There is also the need to add numbers where the performing stage is large and prune them for smaller stages. Entries and exits have to be planned differently for different stage configurations.
- e) **Uniformity of Aharya:** The choreography stands out when all dancers are dressed in identical attire with identical jewellery, hairdo, flowers, etc since it is this uniformity that succeeds in making each formation a complete whole.

f) **Height:** As far as possible identical heights and builds help in achieving overall symmetry although I have had success with varying heights and builds. Some adjustments in formations need to be made to address such variation.

g) **Props:** I strongly believe that enhancement with props or special lighting effects are unnecessary. A simple brightly lit stage should be sufficient and the rest is taken care of by the dancers and choreography.

h) **Styles:** It is also vital that all dancers are from the same bani, since stances, movements, the method of executing the adavus can interfere with patterns and symmetry if the dancers are of different banis.

i) **Rhythm and music:** Each one has to have exceptional grasp of rhythm and its subtleties like fractional tala eduppus, complex kaarvais. Each has to have a solid grounding in classical music since with dancing for swara patterns the co ordination is always based on close following of the music.

**The Synergy:** Looking back on the seven hundred- odd programs that the group has seen, the greatest and the most vital aspect turns out to be the gelling of the group as one. There needs to be mutual admiration, respect and affection. Never is there any competition for prominence or limelight. The abiding spirit has to be a single-minded focus on the success of every programme no matter where it is - in some small remote nondescript place or a big national or international stage. It is sheer devotion to the art for its own sake. No matter what level we achieve in our art and whatever we do for innovation within the tradition, we have to eventually bow to the rasika. Although I have put my experience in words they are best expressed on stage.

**B.Bhanumati** learnt Bharatanatyam from K. N. Dandayudhapani Pillai, Dr. K. Venkatalakshamma and Smt. Kalanidhi Narayanan. Her school Nrityakalamandiram in Bengaluru has produced solo dancers of repute. She is the recipient of the Senior Fellowship for Group Choreography. She is the recipient of the Karnataka Rajyotsava Award, besides several other awards and titles.



Nritya Tarangini



Shakti Prabhavam

## Dance Drama

*Natyam tan naatakam chaiva poojyam poorva kathayutam*

- V. P. Dhananjayan

**N**atya is the correct term that we should use for all our performing arts which have a three-dimensional meaningful connotation - physical, mental and spiritual. No other art form in the world has these three aspects in view. We must eschew the use of the term "dance" (a term that denotes more of physical movements only) to denote our kind of performing arts. Especially Bharatanatyam should always be addressed as such and practitioners of this art form should fastidiously adhere to this word while writing and avoid referring in a loose manner to "dance".



V. P. Dhananjayan

changes, provided that practitioners adhere to aesthetic parameters and see that creativity does not descend into vulgarity.

We all know that in recent times, the revival of the Natya tradition started with the establishment of Kalakshetra. Present day

dance dramas all take inspiration from the trend Rukmini Devi started with her monumental creations. It should not be misconstrued if I say that the Western term "choreography" (Samvidhanam) or arrangements on a proscenium stage started with Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra dance dramas, as far as Dakshina Bharat is concerned.

Creating a proper dance drama in its true sense is a laborious process involving months and years of intellectual and physical work. In today's environment, time is money. In order to produce and present a good professional dance drama, a huge amount of money is involved. This fact is not often realised by the patrons or the audience.

Let me also confess that what many of us dancers/choreographers and teachers present in the name of dance dramas are not in conformity with the real sense of the term Natya. Though we have good connoisseurs who enjoy such grand productions of classical dance theatre, unfortunately we do not have producers to finance such good ventures. This is the plain truth and the artistes and connoisseurs have to be satisfied with whatever we can conjure up with limited resources. The fact is that we do not get compensation even for providing proper lighting for a dance production, leave alone other things like costumes or props.

In the context of Indian classical theatre the word dance drama may be the closest English term for Natya. According to Nandikeswara's 'Abhinaya Darpana', Natya means presentation or enacting a drama of celebrated stories from epic and mythology. The basic ingredients for a Natakam is said to be Nritya and Nritya. Even spoken dramas like Kalidasa's 'Abignana Shakunthalam' and other Samskritam dramas have used these three types of communication within dance.

The concept, content and subject matter for depiction have evolved further to suit changing times. The authentic traces of the old scripture (Natya Sastra) can only be witnessed in Koodiattam, Krishnanaattam and Kathakali. To a certain extent, Bhagavatamela natakam of Tamil Nadu, Kuchipudi natakam of Andhra Pradesh and the Yakshagana of Karnataka retain some of the flavour of the old Natyasastra tradition. Of course, change is imperative and the Sastras have given us the freedom to make



The main aspects to be taken into account while attempting to produce and choreograph a dance drama are:

1. Selecting the theme, script—either existing old texts – or writing a new one.
2. It should have a literary value in order to make it more classical.
3. The lyrics should be edited according to the content, context and time.
4. Music composition, choice of ragas, swaras, jatis, etc., are to be set according to the situation and characters.
5. Selection of the characters – It is appropriate to have males for roles of males and females for roles of females, though we have a tradition of males adopting roles of female, but not vice versa.
6. Choreography – This is the most difficult part and also time-consuming. A trial-and-error method applies here.
7. Practice sessions – The dancers have to be drilled, and given many rehearsals for the sake of co-ordination. This is followed by the dance and music. Make-up is a very tricky and sensitive issue in a dance drama.

These are some of the critical features one should focus on when producing a dance drama. We have produced almost 35 dance group productions with thematic representations, but I cannot term all of them as dance dramas.

#### Problems at each step

According to all treatises of Bharata Natya sampradaya (Indian theatre traditions) from the historical and chronological evidence available, Natya has been described as a group effort for educating the illiterate, enlightening the literate and entertaining the enlightened. 'Drishya kavya' or visual media had been an integral part of our system of education.

The divine theory of the origin of Natya

enunciated in the mother book of Natya *Sastra* clearly states the concept, method and purpose of this group activity. Human evolution also demonstrates the power of group endeavours -bringing people together to educate, enlighten and entertain. The group presentations in any form of art or activities had better impact on the human mind and were common through the ages. They prevailed until modern man started slowly becoming more and more individualistic.

Apart from this, economic conditions contributed to the fragmentation of theatre groups. When kings, landlords, feudal society and temples maintained such groups of artistic activities, the artists had no problem of training and keeping a high standard of performance. All the members in the group including the lowest imbibed a comprehensive knowledge of the art forms they were attached to and this spirit of discipline, devotion and dedication elevated the presentation to a sublime level of spirituality. But when royal and feudal patronage started dwindling due to various reasons of invasion, slavery under British rule, etc., smaller and fragmented groups emerged, giving way to solo performances of classical dance and music concerts. So in the recent past we have seen Bharatanatyam emerging as solo presentation, which also boosted the individualistic side of a performing artiste. My objective in writing this article is not to probe into the past, but the problems faced now by our performing artists in general and, in particular, Bharatanatyam artistes.

#### Audience Interest

Solo Bharatanatyam performances are rampant and every dancer wants to shine individually. No one is interested in attaching themselves to a professional group. Solo performance is enjoyed or preferred only by enlightened connoisseurs, whose number is reducing

day by day. That is why there are smaller audiences for solo performances. The calibre of the younger generation of solo performers also fails to sustain the interest of the discerning audience. Another reason is, of course, that the supply is more than demand.

The organisers of cultural shows therefore prefer to engage performances by groups. One advantage is that each performer brings in a couple of friends or relatives and this fills the hall, whether that audience is interested in Bharatanatyam or not. This category of pseudo-rasikas who after looking at the colourful costumes and beautiful girls (not boys, of course), this category of pseudo-rasikas walks away after a few minutes. Many a time these kinds of productions are terrible and totally belie the purpose of "Natya". Generally among professional dancers we call this kind of presentation 'school anniversary' programme. Unfortunately some of our prestigious sabhas feature these non-professional group productions and are not willing to shell out money to present professional groups. It is also a fact that a few professional young dancers try to get together to form a dance troupe and present innovative and novel ideas. But it is short lived because of financial inadequacy to keep the fire burning. Initially they pool money to produce a professional production, with a high expectation of repeat performances. It does not often happen. The disappointed youngsters get frustrated and slowly dismantle their troupes and resort to private tuitions for livelihood.

#### Problem In production

Bharatanatyam technique has vast scope for mega productions that will appeal to all class of people and attract a large crowd. But the organisers of cultural events do not really realise the potential and come forward to invest money to produce classic events. Companies, Government

organizations and event management enterprises support mega events with huge sums of money that are unaesthetic, unethical and nothing to do with our culture. But when it comes to a classical production of a large size, all these organisations are reluctant to be liberal in payments not realising their worth. Even the sabhas which are supposed to be promoters of classical arts do not take the trouble of understanding the problems of artists.

#### The process of production

To bring out a good classical production, at least a year-long labour is involved, if it really has to be of a professional standard. If a dance drama is to be choreographed the process involves the following aspects:

1. Research for literature, poems or lyrics from ancient texts with the help of a scholar in a particular language. This takes a couple of weeks for the scholar to compile.
2. The choreographer has to sit with the scholar to choose the right kind of lines to suit the dance delineation and edit the lyrics. He has to understand the in-depth meaning word by word.
3. Engage a good music composer to set the tunes, swaras, jatis and other musical embellishments. It will take a few months.
4. The vocalist has to learn the composed music and, in turn, has to teach it to the other accompanying artists.
5. One has to find the right kind of male and female dancers. The choreographer has the most difficult job of visualising the whole production and creating it with the dancers. Coordinating the moods and movements of dancers is a Herculean task which takes long hours of practice for several weeks and months.
6. Costume design, choosing materials, tailoring and making suitable ornaments according to the

characters, are areas very sensitive and tricky that need great attention to go with the subject of the production, period of story or event being portrayed on the stage.

7. In a classical production set design has to be done very carefully for each production. It should be suggestive and effective and at the same time, should not distract from the dance choreography.

8. Lighting is another very difficult and costly affair involving a professional light designer who is also knowledgeable about dance and music. Else, he should be trained during the rehearsal period in the choreography.

9. Preparing publicity materials, such as good professional photos, script writing, brochure design and printing, etc., have become an integral part of a major production.

A sensible person can understand the financial implications of the above production process. Time is money for every professional and when we involve such professionals they all should be adequately compensated. The production value is also determined by the kind of people who work backstage before a dance drama is finally presented.

Established institutions are able to do such massive productions and they have been successful in getting large ticket-buying crowd. Government-subsidised institutions could probably present their major group productions at a reasonably low cost, but even for them the minimum basic expenses for maintaining a group of professional artistes, upkeep of costume, jewellery, stage properties, transportation, etc., amount to a six-figure budget.

The young aspiring and enthusiastic dancers are not able to give vent to their creative abilities because of the financial problem. The organisations are not willing to accept their genuine need and encourage them with adequate funds. Instead the organisers exploit the gullibility of artistes and no consideration is given for their time and energy. In spite of this adverse situation, if someone actually ventures to harness the talent and produce a mega show where is the space for them to practise and rehearse? Hiring a big hall for daily rehearsal for a few weeks will cost them a fortune. Who will defray the cost?

It is unfortunate that these artistes themselves have to do their administrative work, PRO work, publicity work, door-to-door canvassing and over and above this to get a chance in a sabha platform they have to make umpteen visits to the house of a secretary or several telephone calls. The young artistes narrate their humiliating experience in such meetings. Some of the organisers are very discourteous. If it is a Government organization, there is nepotism, political influence, bureaucratic syndrome and all that goes with inaccessibility to those high officials who control the decisions.

A fresh Engineer or MBA or any other professional commands a generous income for a routine nine-to-five job. An artiste on the other hand, works the same amount of time for weeks or months together in a professional dance production. Think how much more he should be earning! The days of art-for-art's-sake are gone and so also has royal patronage. Who then will help artistes to keep their creative fire burning?

V P Dhananjayan holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Dance (Bharatanatyam and Kathakali) with distinction from Kalakshetra, Chennai, and was a leading male dancer under Rukmini Devi. V P Dhananjayan and his wife Shanta Dhananjayan, founded Bharata Kalanjali which has emerged as a full-fledged academy of dance and music. They received the Padma Bhushan in 2009 for development, preservation and propagation of the best of Kalakshetra tradition.



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Anita Ratnam



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## The Many Layers of India's Modern Dance

- Anita Ratnam

**T**he curve of the eyebrow framing fish-shaped eyes

The cascade of inky hair around a lotus-hued face

The arch of a passionate embrace like entwined creepers...

These are classic phrases that have inspired movement and dance imagery for several centuries.



Anita Ratnam

was and still could become - an independent nation of many languages, dance and music styles. Uday Shankar saw the potential of establishing a unity through a movement investigation that brought similarities and differences of the many dance forms of India. He never lived to see his ideas take fruit, but is largely acknowledged as the father of Indian modern dance.

**Contrast these gentle images with the following.**

A harrowing nightmare,  
A raped girl child,  
Gunshots and hypodermic needles  
Domestic violence and environmental tragedy

The urgency of the second set of images is perhaps one of the ways that I can begin to describe the throbbing pulse of contemporary dance. Discarding the ideas of beauty and harmony that classical formalism offers, modern dance adventurers throughout history have searched for dark and forbidden moments in their own lives to create a new dance idiom that is popularly known as contemporary dance.

In India, Uday Shankar was perhaps the earliest seeker of a pan-Indian idiom through his painstaking knitting of various classical and folk dance styles. India as an ancient civilisation was emerging as a self-assured new nation in the 1930's and 40's. Dance and music were the poster images of a time honoured civilization and a link with an unbroken past. The classical arts were examples of the best of India that once

While Bharatanatyam and Kathak are the most recognizable classical styles within and outside India, a new energy has fueled the growth and questioning of established dance forms and practice. More information, travel, the growth of the diasporas around the world and their own stake in Indian identity have all fueled a renewed search within dance for a fresher and more urgent relevance of the form. While classical dance remains the most common foundational training ground for the mushrooming young breed of contemporary Indian dancers, it is by stepping out of the proverbial "Lakshman Rekha" of rules and tradition that Indian dance has become most exciting. This new dance movement is still nascent but developing self-confidence with a visible rapidity. Today's current generation of contemporary dancers in India and of Indian descent around the world are bold, intelligent, agile, articulate and bristling with an energy that is rarely seen in the classical dance scene..

Over the past 80 years, Indian classical dance has become synonymous with a 'cultural product', collapsing values, ideals and human behavior codes. Contemporary dance, meanwhile, although a late starter, has been free to

explore and roam the maze of human behavior, tap personal mythology and scour the landscape of imagination without preconceived impositions about propriety and decorum. This has thrown up moments of shock and awe, like the early work of choreographer Chandralekha. Her 1984 return to the dance stage with her seminal knitting of Yoga, Kalaripayattu and Bharatanatyam offered a totally fresh way of looking at the female body shorn of adornment and artifice. Chandralekha's own life had wandered through the main streets and by lanes of dance, music, art, activism and the feminist movement. Her dance landscape was always fore grounded by her constant questioning of modernity on her own terms. While searching for her now widely acclaimed and imitated physicality of the dancing body, she was insistent on finding an Indian version of modernity and not submit to any established western models that were readily available.

The years between Uday Shankar and Chandralekha were many but the questions about Indian contemporary dance remain as urgent as ever. If today, classical dancers are "experimenting" vigorously with new ideas and casting the old wine in newer bottles like modern costumes and lighting effects, it is the direct effect of society's impatient call for the "new". Within the creative arc of contemporary dance there is a great cross illumination between theatre and performance. modern theatre forms in India are using physical movement and choreography with the broader Indian aesthetic of "natya" or total theatre. Dialogue and movement training are mandatory steps theatre training while voice modulation and stage presence are being taught to contemporary dancers by theatre directors. Today contemporary dance festivals and events are closer to a dance-theatre experience with spoken word, everyday movement, casual gestures, humour, satire and extreme

physicality being the norm.

Classical dance has always encouraged the established system of feudal respect between the guru and the sishya. Hierarchies are clearly delineated even today between dancer and his/her accompanying musicians. The contemporary dance field is more democratic with the artistes sharing the creative vision and participating in the making and performing of the dance work. The dancers rub shoulders with martial artists, gymnasts, street acrobats, theatre actors and musicians. It is this jostling of the many forms of arts that is energizing India's contemporary dance world. Newer lighting design techniques and visual artistes have collaborated with contemporary dancers as have costume designers and experimental musicians. The bristling and creative space has welcomed new thoughts and writing from young wordsmiths and established choreography as an independent art form. Installation art, activist art, multimedia dance, performance art are all new dimensions of the dance-art that are rapidly being absorbed in the developing dialogue of contemporary movement in India.

However vociferously one may argue the case for contemporary dance in India, it is still an urban and niche activity. The practice, performance and viewing are confined to a small group of educated elite who are also searching for a rigorous and intelligent response to life around them. This audience, though small, are disenchanted with the "effete" of classical Indian dance and its increased posturing about being "pure" and "true." While the purist viewer may not be comfortable with long periods of silence, minimal movement or repeated phrasing that often frame contemporary Indian dance, many are delighted with the sense of discipline, the austere focus on the body and the challenges that are thrown

to the viewer. The content of a contemporary is usually not a linear narrative of a familiar myth or legend that populates the cultural memory of the Indian mind. Contemporary dance can be fragmented, as if rearranging a sentence and extracting one word to explore and expand. This approach can sometimes seem tedious in a country full of colour, variety and sounds. However, good contemporary dance has a clarity and direction that is often startling and refreshing. The dancer is more or less stripped of ornamentation and the kinetic of the movement is revealed in an unforgiving light. While the current trend of contemporary Indian dance is to blank the face and not use the emotive aspect of theatrical 'abhinaya', future creations that absorb the nuances of the Indian training with other modes of physical discipline will show a maturity in this developing indigenous form.

The nomenclatures for new dance in India are several. Thirty years ago, the late Manjushree Chaki Sarkar in Kolkatta named her pan Indian style Nava Nritya - literally meaning New Dance. Her ensemble DANCERS GUILD had her stunning daughter Ranjabati take the form to an international level before her tragic demise. Names are many for each individual's interpretation of the "contemporary" or "modern" in Indian dance. Nava Natya, Nova Natya, Naveena Nritya and Neo Bharatam, the last being a style based on my own foundational training of Bharatanatyam with the layering of meditative and martial arts.

There are three main categories that can separate the contemporary from the classical.

- Old form - new content
- Old content - new form
- New form - new content

It is the third area that is the most challenging to focus on. While classical

dancers are using words like 'experimental' and 'contemporary' more and more, they are mostly engaged in changing superficial areas like costumes and music to perform with the same taught vocabulary. Contemporary dancers begin with known 'words' from their taught traditions but use the idea of 'improvisation' as the primary tool to shape the dance content. They are less interested in telling stories or communicating morality from the ancient past and more immersed in 'speaking' with the urgency of the here and now.

Today's contemporary dance scene in India has many artistes who have invested more than 3 decades in pursuit of a more immediate relevance to their environment. The leaders in this new movement have emerged mostly from classical Bharatanatyam and Kathak. Daksha Sheth's dance company based in Kerala, engages with aerial rope movements and Kalaripayattu body conditioning. Her Kathak colleague from New Delhi, Aditi Mangaldas uses the classical vocabulary and explores varying concepts of time and timelessness. In New Delhi, Bharatanatyam and yoga trained Navtej Johar successfully combines his Sikh identity with a seer like stage presence to dance with a meditative quiet that is hypnotic. Actor-dancer Maya Krishna Rao employs her Kathakali training with elaborate sets and props for her startling works on contemporary Indian society. The elder statesman of the New Delhi group was the late Narendra Sharma, a principal dancer with Uday Shankar who went on to establish BHOOMIKA, his dance ensemble and continue the legacy of his guru. His son Bharat Sharma and wife Tripura Kashyap, a former dancer with the Chandralekha Company, are reshaping this once active performance troupe for these changing times.

In South India, Bengaluru is a veritable hotbed for contemporary and classical

dance. The city is bristling with so many young dancers and styles and audiences are supportive of the many jostling energies. Among the best known dancers and choreographers is Madhu Natraj who draws from her Kathak training and modernist outlook to create and perform with her dance company called STEM (space, time, energy, movement). Other groups like Attakalan have established a base in this city with links to the UK for professional training and development. Nritarutya is another popular ensemble from Bengaluru focused on new media, film and event based choreography. SHIRI dance ensemble engages in dance theatre and spoken word productions. In Kolkatta, Tanushree Shankar's group has continued the tradition of her late father in law Uday Shankar's pan Indian approach with rigorous western training methods in improvisation, space exploration and partnering. Younger dancers like Sudarshan Chakraborty's SAPPHIRE Dance Company and Vikram Iyengar's RANAN are also seriously invested in creating contemporary work. Ronnie and Mitul of Rhythmosaic incorporate Kathak, jazz and western dance techniques in their new dance investigations.

In Puduchery, iconoclast theatre director Veenapani Chawla has researched breathing techniques from Kathakali, Mohiniattam and Koodiyattam to train actors and dancers in discovering new movement from a variety of ritual and traditional performance traditions. Her ADISHAKTI space and performance group are enmeshed in years of research and exploration before each new work. The legendary Chandralekha used Madras as her base to live and create her seminal choreographies that redefined the way a female dancer was viewed on stage. Today, her last creation, SHARIRA, continues to mesmerize audiences around the world. Among her senior dancers, Padmini Chettur has established a reputation in Europe for her

minimal style. New Delhi, Kolkatta, Bengaluru, Chennai and Kerala are the hotspots for the incubation of contemporary Indian dance.

Among the earliest of dance explorers was Astad Deboo from Bombay. Kathakali and American modern dance training gave him the ability and the freedom to create a variety of compelling solo works as well as use his teaching skills for special needs groups like those with hearing challenges. After years of being accused of being too Western, Astad is embraced, applauded and awarded by the mainstream dance establishment in India.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of contemporary dance in India is that it has galvanized the classical dance community to pay more attention to fitness, appearance and aesthetics. Presenters are demanding excellent group choreography, something contemporary Indian dance has spent years perfecting. Indian classical dance is taught as a solo art and group work is a fairly recent development in India. Solo contemporary dance is very rarely seen outside India but within this country there are several soloists who create and perform alone. Since contemporary dance is harder to create and more difficult to perform with fewer opportunities, these marginalized performers are constantly engaged in enquiry and debate about culture and the relevance of the dancing body in today's world of power and speed. While intentionally collaborating with a wide range of artistic activity, the world of contemporary dance is often asking questions about cultural imperialism, anxieties of influence, pluralistic identities and the lack of utopian bodies as idealized in classical dance.

There are several new training methods that are beginning to emerge in India for the dancer eager to participate in contemporary movement. While many

turn to the West for established and recognized modern dance styles, there is a growing consensus that the richness of India's forms can become a wellspring of information and inspiration for the new dance-seeker.

This new generation of contemporary dancers is an impatient lot. Not waiting for social sanction or approval from the gatekeepers of tradition, they are smart, savvy and technologically more conversant with new media than their classical colleagues. Necessity and famine-like funding scenarios have galvanized them into a combination of tenacity and creative inventiveness. They are not just shaping and performing contemporary dance, they are also creating spaces and opportunities for new dance in India. Anusha Lal has created the GATI forum in New Delhi and is hosting IGNITE a festival devoted exclusively to contemporary dance., Madhu Natraj holds regular dialogues and informal showings of new work at her charming studio in Bengaluru, Sudarshan Chakraborty of Sapphire Dance in Kolkatta hosts INTERFACE, a contemporary dance biennale, while Kalari duo, Sajeev and Madhu convinced the Kerala Government to fund the state's first modern dance event in early 2010. Other emerging contemporary dancers are Mayuri Upadhyay, Veena Basavarajaiah, Preethi Athreya, Tishani Doshi, Mandeep Raikhy, Anitha Santhanam, Arunima Gupta and Pradeesh.

The various styles, presentations and training methods for contemporary dance are still too varied and irregular in India to

slot into neat compartments. The amount of time spent in training outside the known traditional dance forms, are not dense enough to give clarity to the form with its own accent. Other Asian modern dance companies have synthesized their philosophies into a contemporary performance style that is still unclear with the modern dance movement in this country. Perhaps it is this lack of clarity that is causing the majority community to mock and dismiss the contemporary dancers and their attempts at creating new work which talks with the urgency of the present tense.

Even today very few institutions offer syllabus like courses with emphasis on choreography, dance making or the aesthetics of contemporary performance.. There is no one signature style that signifies Indian contemporary dance together other than the fact that almost all the practitioners have been trained in one or more styles of classical dance or theatre. Often the dances themselves appear fractured and not cohesive for the average viewer fed on stories, stories and more stories. Discomfort, shock, surprise, delight, laughter, silence... these are often the companions to a viewing experience of contemporary dance. Less a tapestry and more a patchwork quilt of various ideas and energies, the modern Indian dancer hopes for an equally curious and alert audience who can journey alongside with them in this exciting pathway that we know as Indian contemporary dance.



**Dr. Anita R Ratnam** holds a Ph.D. in Women's Studies and is an arts entrepreneur. She is a dance-actor, choreographer, speaker and writer on performance and modernity in art and society. As artistic director of India's first annual contemporary arts festival THE OTHER FESTIVAL, she is the founder and managing editor of the renowned dance web portal [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com) in 2000. Dr Ratnam is the creator and performer of a personal style of contemporary Indian dance called Neo Bharatam.





Nritya Geetanjali Productions



## Music for Bharatanatyam

- Smt. Rajee Narayan

Music is an integral part of dance. We can have music without dance but dance can never be without music. It otherwise becomes a mime. Any lyrical piece has to have a suitable ragam to bring out the correct bhava of the words. We have to go back in time and see how and in what format the music was set for dances in order to understand the nuances of variations in music that need to be composed for dance.

Even in my case, only after going through many books based on music and dance shastras and discussing the intricacies with senior teachers and connoisseurs, did I venture to compose songs specifically for dance. In order to trace the origin of present-day Bharatanatyam and its music, we have to pursue the history of these art forms as given to us by the famous Tanjore brothers. I shall give a brief account of this history.

During the late eighteenth century there was an oduvar who used to recite the tevaram everyday in a small temple, in a remote village, in the heart of Tamilnadu. His sons Gangaimuthu and Ramalingam started singing those tevarams with music and also started doing abhinaya to bring out the meaning of these songs. The next generation, the sons of Ramalingam-Subbarayan and Chidambaram started singing those tevarams with more elaborations and even better abhinaya. Later, Gangaimuthu Nattuvanar composed kavuthvams for dance. These pieces were presented beautifully by Subbarayan and Ramalingam. The then King Raja Raja Chola saw them and took them to Rajarajeswaram and made them



teach these songs and dances to people at a small temple situated there. Subbarayan had four sons. They were Chinnaiah, Ponnaiah, Sivanandam and Vadivelu. Tulaja Maharaja took a liking to them and so took them to Tanjavur and asked them to perform and also teach these items at the

Brihadeeshwara Temple. The king was so impressed with their singing that he persuaded Sri Muthuswamy Dikshitar to teach them classical music. The brothers simply excelled in this. Tulaja Maharaja and later Sarfoji Maharaja encouraged the brothers to do something more regarding the dances. This resulted in the brothers setting the dance in a proper format so that learning would become more systematic and easier. Thus they composed Alarippu, Jathiswaram, swarajathi, varnam, padam, javali, tillana and shloka. To this list, King Sarfoji, being a composer himself, added a sabdam. Thus the margam of dances was complete. Till date we follow this basic structure in Bharatanatyam.

The youngest brother Vadivelu was always keen on bringing out variations and innovations in dance. He was invited by Maharaja Swathi Thirunal of Travancore to teach not only Bharatanatyam but also Carnatic music to the princesses of the royal family as also to other art loving persons. While the princesses learnt it for their pleasure others learnt it for performing in temples and other special occasions. From a British priest of a local church, Vadivelu learnt to play the violin. He experimented and practiced to play Carnatic music also. He thus introduced violin as a pakkavadayam (accompanying

instrument) initially for Carnatic vocal concerts.

The Trinity of Carnatic music, Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar & Shyama Sastri gave us songs dripping with devotion. They also gave us kritis detailing the wonders performed by the Gods and Goddesses. Many of their songs help us understand our religion better. Hence these songs started being adapted to Bharatanatyam.

When I was a girl of six or seven, I was taught *poddu poyye, kommarovani, netrandi nerathile, manavi chekonna* (varnam) *bharuvaro bararo* etc. I did not understand their meaning then. I just repeated the expressions as taught by my Gurus. When I performed on the stage, audiences always appreciated my performances but I used to feel a little peeved because I wanted to understand their meaning a little better. But those days one did not have the liberty or courage to ask leading questions to our elders and teachers. Later, when I started teaching my young students always wanted detailed explanation of lyrics. That is when I found it difficult and a little delicate to explain the real meaning of songs based on *sringara rasa*. This is what led to my attempt to write lyrics and compose songs for Bharatanatyam.

Composing a meaningful song is not at all easy. So I started off by composing a *tillana* in *Brindavanasaranga* ragam. Once this was performed on stage and accepted by the audience, I went on to compose the *Ramayana sabdam*. I first thought of writing the song in the traditional *misra chapu talam*. When I started penning the lyrics, I found that certain stanzas would sound and look better if danced as a *viruttam*. So I incorporated this too. Again I found that if the ragas were different, they would lend better support to the lyrics. Hence I chose to start the first stanza with the traditional ragam *Kamboji*. The second stanza

explains *Kaikeyi* being given the boons. I found that *Dhanyasi* ragam suited this well. The third stanza explains *Bharata* asking for and taking the *paduka* of *Rama*. Here I chose the ragam *Sahana* to suit the melancholy mood. The final stanza details the joyous *Pattabhishekam*, so I chose the ragam *Hamsanandi*. Once the ragas were fixed, I sang the song repeatedly while I actually danced the song. I went on refining the variations in *sangatis* etc., till I was totally satisfied. It was only after that did I started teaching it to students. Once the *tillana* and *sabdam* were accepted and appreciated on the stage by dance-lovers, other Gurus and dancers, I gathered enough courage to start composing in good earnest.

I am of the opinion that *varnams* should be composed generally in heavy (*ghana*) ragams. This is because when you teach elaboration (*sanchari*) in a heavy ragam, one can have good scope for variations in *sangatis*. The line of the song should not be sung as *neraval* when a dance is performed. So, heavy ragas give us scope. Hence I composed my first varnam *Gokulabala* in *Kalyani* ragam. Other songs followed and when I had composed around twenty songs specifically suited for dance, I decided to present these in the form of a book. The first thing I did after taking this decision was to send my script to late Prof. T.V. Ramanujam with the specific request that he should go through it as thoroughly as possible and suggest changes or enhancements wherever necessary. He was satisfied with all the songs and was very impressed. He introduced me to *Sangeetha Kalanidhi K.S. Narayanaswamy*. I requested him also to scrutinize the songs. I explained to him that the twenty five songs were grouped into two complete *margams* of Bharatanatyam dance form. The first *margam* had songs based on *bhakti bhava* while the second *margam* had songs based on *sringara*

*rasa*. After satisfying himself by actually singing out the songs, *Narayanaswamy Mama* suggested that I could perhaps take up certain ragas like *Yadukula kambodi*, *Nadanamakriya*, *Kuriniji* etc. in the second *margam*. I immediately changed the ragas for two of my *padams* and a *javali*. He was taken in by my prompt action. Both *Ramanujam Sir* and *Narayanaswamy Mama* gave very good introduction and foreword respectively, for my book and this stood me in real good stead. The response for the book was very heart-warming. Not only dancers but also Gurus of other institutions started adapting my songs for their stage presentations. This encouraged me to pen more and more songs suited for dance.

Right after my first book was released, there were people who wanted me to compose in north Indian languages. I was a little wary because I was not sure of two things—the suitability of the language for Bharatanatyam as also my felicity with the nuances of even Hindi. So I initially desisted from writing in Hindi or attempting dance numbers in other north Indian languages. However, *Mumbai Doordarshan* once insisted on my presenting a programme for them where Bharatanatyam would be performed to Marathi lyrics. I was hesitant at first, but they said that if I gave a basic format in any known language, they would provide me with a poet who would compose Marathi lyrics suitably. I chose the universal theme of *Krishna* and gave the poet sentences in English and Hindi. He wrote lines in Marathi. I chose the *Hindusthani raga Rageshree* to give musical touch to the lyrics and presented it in a group format for television. It was extremely successful and was telecast repeatedly on viewers' demand. After this experience, I ventured into composing in Hindi. The first song I composed in Hindi had a *virahotkantita nayika* as the theme. I chose *Ahir bhairav* as the raga and *misra chapu* as the *talam*. This was first

presented by CPC Delhi. This was also very well received. From then on I shed my reservations and went on to compose two *varnams* in Hindi. Both were based on *bhakti bhava*. I have also composed some *padams* in Hindi portraying different *nayikas*.

Singing for dance performances is an art by itself. The singer has to be very alert and see to it that the actions of the dancer synchronize with the lyrics. While the dancer is performing *sancharis* especially, care has to be taken regarding lyrics. One has to necessarily bring in variations for the line that is repeated but the rendition cannot incorporate *neravals* like in a music concert. It has to suit the dancer's movements. Again, the singer has to watch the dancer very attentively because in case the dancer repeats an action for one extra time or somehow skips an action, the singer has to be alert enough to also skip that particular line and move on to the next lyric. If it is not done, then the dancer will be performing an action which is not in accordance with the meaning of the lyrics. This coordination can come through only with repeated practice sessions and rehearsals. The primary rule during a dance performance is that singing should flow with the dance action. It should not dominate or overshadow the dance. People, who have had the rare privilege of watching the great MS or MLV singing *padams* for their daughters' stage performance, would have noticed first that they sang in such a way that song blended with the dance but never dominated the dancer. In fact they always sat facing the dancer dancing on the stage so that their concentration was on their movements. They never sat facing the audience. At best they directed a couple of glances towards the guru to ascertain whether they should proceed or repeat that line again. This must be the rule when a singer is accompanying a dancer.

When one composes lyrics and music for dance, one has to take care about selecting ragams. Understanding the mood of the song will be the basis for selecting ragam for that piece. Heavy ragams like Kalyani, Kamboji, Shankarabharanam etc. lend lots of scope for elaboration and can be used for main items. For group rendition or *natanatakams*, one has the choice to use lighter ragams like Behag, Bageshree, Bheempalasi, Maund, Tilang, etc. Ragams like Kanada, Bilahari, Anandabhairavi, etc. suit both heavy and light items. Ragams like Bhoopalam, Malayamarutham, Nattai, Gambheeranattai, Hamsadvani, etc. could be used for invocatory items. Ragams like Kalyani, Huseni, Bilahari, Mohanam, Amruthavarshini, Kapi, etc. are suitable for jatiswarams. For sabdams, the entire song or at least the first and last stanza should be in Kamboji ragam. The intervening stanzas could have other suitable ragams. For varnams, the most preferred ragams include Kalyani, Kamboji, Shankarabharanam, Karaharapriya, Shanmukhapriya, Bhairavi etc. Sometimes even traditional composers use certain beautiful ragams

to essay their varnam creations. For example, Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar has composed a Telegu padavarnam *Danikorikenu* in Vasantha ragam set to Misra Jampai Talam. It is a rare gem. As mentioned earlier, the ragams chosen for varnams give scope for vast elaborations during sancharis, without becoming monotonous. General padams can have ragams like, Atana, Nattakurinji, Harikamboji, Kamas, Vasantha, Abhogi, etc., apart from ghana ragams, as per the theme of the padam. Javalis look fetching if they have ragams like Kapi, Behag, Nadanamakriya, Yadukulakamboji, Paras, Kamas, Surutti, begada, etc.

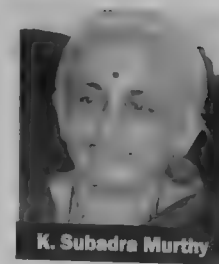
The music field is so vast that one can choose from any number of ragams. But the basic rule should be that it should suit the sthayibhava of the particular dance.

Many of the modern composers use very rare ragams for some of their compositions. It is a good trend, but sometimes the ragam chosen by them does not have scope for elaboration. In such cases the song becomes monotonous. This is where a composer should tread carefully.

**Guru Smt. Rajee Narayan** is a dancer, reputed teacher, musician and a composer. She is the founder-director of Nritya Geetanjali, a premier dance school in Mumbai which trains students in Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music and nattuvangam. Guru Rajee Narayan has published the Nritya Geeta Mala consisting of her Carnatic music compositions for dance. She is the recipient of the Maharashtra Gaurav Puraskar, the M.S. Subbulakshmi Best Teacher Award besides several other awards and titles.

## Dance Criticism

- K. Subadra Murthy



K. Subadra Murthy

It is an unfortunate fact that to become a successful dancer and perform consistently talent alone is not enough in this age of commercialism. Unless the artiste has abundant financial support and influential contacts, seriously pursuing a career in dancing is not an option for most. But, their talent need not go waste – they can either teach if they are so inclined or become dance critics as they are in a unique position to deliver valuable opinion from a sound knowledge base. Unfortunately, most dancers draw back from writing about their seniors/peers as they do not wish to offend anyone. A pity – because they will make better critics than those who have no background whatsoever in dance! And if they establish themselves as impartial and credible critics, they need fear no ostracism from the dance fraternity. I hope this article will motivate a few at least to take to dance criticism.

Criticism is the art of evaluating a work of art, whether it is dance, music, painting or any other art form. It is about recording one's considered opinion and impression of a particular work and its aim is to create a fuller aesthetic experience of a work of art/performance for the reader.

The word critic comes from the Greek *kritikós* – one who discerns. A critic is one who expresses a value judgment and analysis on a specific work and plays a major part in the creation of public taste. A dance critic creates and chronicles dance history and should have precise, objective observation and refined memory. A fair critic will balance both the positive and negative elements of a production in the most tactful manner.

Everyone who is aspiring to be a critic should remember the important fact that a given observation/review is relevant only for that performance. The critic's comment has the capacity to influence the career of an artiste. It can make or break an artiste, hence the responsibility is quite heavy

and one must not shoot off anything that comes to mind just because it sounds witty or because of one's own reservations. A responsible critic will try to gently instruct and suggest with tact, whatever needs to be corrected.

In this context an observation made by G. Venkatachalam, art contributor to *New India*, a paper edited by Annie Besant, is very apt. He said "A critic should have a masterly eye, an understanding and sensitive mind and a loving heart". The best advice a budding critic can ever receive!

Unlike dancers, critics have no institution where they can learn the art of criticism. There is no formal or systematic education in dance criticism, here or elsewhere. Most critics learn only from the experience of continuous viewing.

There are fewer critics and more of reviewers in the media. The line that separates the terms critic and reviewer is rather thin. A reviewer is someone who produces a brief write-up, evaluating a particular performance for the specific media's readership. Most such reviews are published in general magazines, newspapers, online newsletters, etc. Those that are meant for newspapers must be timely and have a tight deadline – failing which the relevance is lost.

A critic's observations tend to be longer

and more insightful. Criticism in select monthly or quarterly publications like *Sruti*, *Nartanam*, *Shannukha*, etc., catering to their niche readership, ranges far and often delves into related subjects disseminating additional information supporting the critic/writer's views.

There are broadly three types of dance writing that determines whether it is a review or a criticism or a critique. The first is more like a report - an item of news. It briefly describes content, the performer and maybe something about the technique. It is not critical - it is straight reporting. The second type reports but also explains, interprets, and evaluates. It is 50% summary and 50% evaluation. The third category is used merely as a starting point for an in-depth article and expands into a critical essay. It also talks about other performances, other artistes, etc., analyses and compares. A good review combines elements from all three.

Criticism is not a neutral description of events. Critics make choices about which works to describe and discuss and the aspects on which to focus. For whom one writes certainly should determine the content. In writing for a more general audience the writer might include a basic synopsis of the story (the central theme of the composition or the episodes taken for *sanchari*), which would be unnecessary, even wasteful, in writing for a more knowledgeable audience or when the story is a popular one like the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*. In writing for a mixed audience, such as a newspaper, a blend of the two is better.

What is unnecessary is a listing of how many *brahmaris* this dancer did as opposed to another dancer and is less important than how the dancer performed, or how it enhanced the performance as a whole.

The writer must be careful when reviewing a given performance and bear in mind that what happened that evening is a one-time event, unless the writer has viewed the

performance, the production and the dancers more than once, and can comment upon improvement made or the lack of it.

Good criticism is subjective and should be based upon sound knowledge of what is being criticized and written with the readership in mind. It generally comes with some degree of humility and respect for the possibility of other equally valid points of view. To offer good criticism must be an act of respect - an act of communication with the intention of helping the other person do better work, or understand their work better. Sarcastic remarks cause more harm than help the dancer.

Constructive criticism is the process of offering valid and well-reasoned opinions about the work of others with the intention of helping the reader or the artist. Criticism voiced out of self-interest or competition may be destructive. A responsible critic spends as much energy describing what a performance is, as well as what it is not. Good criticism serves one purpose - to give the creators of the work more perception and help them make choices about refining their work.

Bad criticism uses the opportunity provided by someone else's work to make the critics feel smart, superior or better about themselves, which has nothing to do with helping the artiste. Most people have the mistaken idea that one has to be acerbic to be considered a good critic.

Good and bad is not the same as what you like or don't like. You must get rid of the idea that anything you like is good, and anything you dislike is bad. You should separate your personal preferences from the analysis of any kind of work to provide useful feedback.

Remember - criticism is not about you. It's about the performance you are viewing and the person that performs. Your personal preferences should not get in the way of evaluating the work objectively. Learn to see the good and noteworthy

aspects of the work you do not like - they are there if you let yourself see them.

**The four major elements of criticism are:**

**Description** - of the specific performance, what the dancers did.

**Interpretation** - What the dancer communicated.

**Evaluation** - How remarkable it was - was the work good? What was the dancer trying to do? How well did the dancer succeed in his or her attempt? If it is a new work, what value does the attempt have?

**Background** - The genre - whether it is Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Contemporary, etc. How good a representation was it of the particular genre, what are the distinguishing features?

Before writing about a performance, there are certain aspects that you should identify:- The strongest impression that has lingered in your mind and try to build the review around this; in the space and time available how can you express your opinion about the performance; what information about the artist's training and background is important for your readers to know; what was the impact of visual atmosphere like space, sets, costumes, lighting, etc., on the performance; how did the choreography or music enhance the performance; did the music suggest any specific atmosphere or environment; were the dancers competent/skillful and what was the quality of their performance.

**What abilities do you need?**

**Writing skills:** Express yourself clearly, concisely and completely. Use short sentences, draft, revise and edit. Often, what you feel is important is snipped off by the editorial staff because it does not come through effectively in your piece. Reread, revise and rewrite with the editor and reader in mind and make the necessary changes yourself to avoid the editor's scissors.

Even if you are a dancer yourself and have the advantage of knowing the genre better than a lay writer, make sure you understand the technique of whatever form you are writing about and its nuances. Constantly updating ones knowledge of the genre, its technique etc., is an important factor that determines whether you are capable of being a critic or a mere reporter. There is no shame in admitting what you do not know and seek the guidance of masters in the art. But make sure you do not pass it off as your own expertise. It is the worst kind of plagiarism!

Watch as many performances of as many styles as possible, write down your impressions, whether you publish or not. Attend lec-dems, read the work of other critics - even of the same performance, to see their perspective and learn from it.

All that is said above holds good for any dance form that you may review. When it comes to Bharatanatyam or a specific style, comment on the technique: what was good/bad about it, has it conformed to the specific style and how the dancer's technique has enhanced the overall quality of the performance. For e.g. *aramandi* is most important in a Bharatanatyam performance (unfortunately, only a handful of dancers maintain this), the way *adavus* are executed, *anga suddham*, etc., have their own importance when evaluating a performance. If the dancer claims to follow a specific *bani*, make a mention of it and if she has deviated from the *bani*. Comment on how it was different and what was the overall effect of the change.

**The repertoire:** Was it the accepted /prescribed '*margam*'? If it was different, how did it affect the performance? Did the dancer present variety in terms of *tala*, *raga* and content that served to highlight her skills as a dancer? Or was it mundane and lackluster?

**Choreography:** What was unique about it? Was it a new work hitherto unseen? Did the dancer do justice to the choreography, how did it help the performance and aesthetic experience?

**Orchestra:** The rapport between the dancer and the accompanists: How did it gel and make a cohesive and enjoyable experience? Quite often, the support from the wings is not up to standard and despite a great performance by the dancer, the experience is diminished by such accompaniment. On the other hand, if the support from the wings, particularly the vocalist, is excellent and far superior to the dancer, one ends up listening to the music and not watch the dance: There should be a judicious blend and balance to result in a wholesome experience.

**Costume and Makeup:** Was it aesthetic, was the dancer overdressed or did the costume vary from the accepted style exclusive to the dance form, and how did it affect the visual impact?

**Lighting and sound:** This is a much neglected area, both by dancers and critics. It is only in recent times that dancers have realized the importance of light and sound in augmenting their performance. Comment in what way these elements add to the performance and viewing experience.

**Potential for growth:** Particularly in a young dancer.

**A word of caution:** Too much of jargon is not advisable when writing for newspapers and more critical evaluation of the technique is best reserved for niche journals.

#### A Few Guiding Principles

**Common sense:** The guiding principle is your own good judgment. Good critics have an inborn sense of what is right and wrong.

**Honesty:** Be true to yourself, the performer and the reader

**Impartiality:** It is one of the few professions where you can deal with the lowest and the greatest, the novice and the maestro. All people deserve equal respect and consideration when you write about them.

**The Golden Rule:** Do not inflict harm on anyone through carelessness or spite. It can have a devastating effect.

**Caution:** Accepting gifts and freebies can lead to embarrassments. Such offerings, no matter how sincerely meant, can leave both the giver and recipient with a feeling of obligation.

**Propriety:** Conflict of interest, or even the appearance of such, can affect a critic's credibility and limit effectiveness.

**Avoid:** Superlatives and unnecessary adjectives. Many fall into the trap of recklessly using hyperboles like scintillating, exquisite, brilliant, out of the world, etc., even while writing about a raw debutante giving the reader the impression that even these superlatives are not lavish enough.

Never give up – keep writing till you get published!

If a review is not worth writing, it is best to avoid writing than promote mediocrity even by adverse criticism. Consistently fair evaluation, coupled with effective description and analysis, earns the critic respect and authoritative standing in his/her community. Good writing will sell.

Above all a critic should be a rasika capable of experiencing rasanubhava without reservations!

Being a good critic takes time: Being a great critic takes many years of dedication.

**K. Subadra Murthy** is a well-known writer and critic. She is the Associate Editor of Nartanam, a reputed journal of dance. She is also a critic and correspondent of Sruti, a premier magazine for the performing arts.

## Book Review

### A Unique Journal

- A. Seshan

#### Attendance

The Dance Annual of India 09/2010, Ashish Mohan Khokar (Editor), Printways, 20/28 West Patel Nagar, New Delhi 110008. Pages 108. Price Rs 700 / \$25



Attendance, the dance annual brought out by India's master archivist Ashish Khokar, is a unique venture in more than one sense. In the first place, it is an archival record of what happened during the reference year, the only one of its kind, which should be valuable to future historians of the Indian dance scene. Secondly, it is not just a listing of events; it highlights the salient features of the programmes. Thirdly, every year the annual is devoted to a theme on which in-depth articles from leading authorities are published. Thus the Annual is a valuable reference work – a collector's item – for dancers, students, choreologists, choreographers and the general group of rasikas. One additional feature that needs to be mentioned is that it is a one-man mission. The editor works on the project using his own funds without much support from Government or other organisations except for a group of friends who volunteer to help him in publication in collecting information, writing reports, editing and so on. Ashish is the son of Mohan Khokar, who pioneered the concept of dance archives more than sixty years ago when it was unheard of in the country and there was little enthusiasm for it either in the government or among the general public. He was the country's first choreologist at a time when that term was yet to be coined. After his death Ashish took over the archives and enriched them through his own

collections. One could get a sample of the valuable contributions of the Khokar family at a seminar held recently at the Nalanda Dance Research Centre in Mumbai when Ashish made a capsule presentation of a century of Indian dance traditions in 20 minutes.

A mere listing of the events in various parts of the country with reviews may not find many readers. In order to make the publication interesting there is a need to have a theme for every year. The theme of the Annual under review comprises three Ms – Mohan Khokar, Male Soloists and Madras Season. Since 2010 marks the tenth anniversary of the passing away of Mohan Khokar it is appropriate to recall his life, times and work. After a description of the function held for the release of the previous edition the highlights of the year in terms of awards and other honours conferred on artistes are covered.

The fascinating story of Mohan Khokar is told by Ashish Khokar, B.M. Sundaram, Mrinalini Sarabhai, G Venu and Saraswati Swaminathan. There is transparency in describing the limitations of his personality, which, of course, pale into insignificance when one compares them with the monumental contributions he made to Indian classical dances. Here was a young Sikh who travelled from the Punjab to the then Madras city to learn Bharatanatyam at the citadel of the art form, viz., Kalakshetra. Rukmini Devi was quick to recognise the potential of the candidate and he became the first north Indian to become a student there. The rest was history.

Many unknown anecdotes like the saving



of the family from the disaster of the earthquake in Quetta by a Sufi Pir saint and his subsequent advice to the Khokar family to move to different places in the interest of their safety and progress in life will convince even the sceptic of the clairvoyance of saintly persons. The remarkable manner in which Mohan built up his collections is recounted in detail. They comprise photos, dance books, posters, artefacts, masks, statues, stamps, textile motifs, gramophone records, music of dance, brochures, first prospectuses of institutions, dance post cards and even matchboxes. At one point of time the whole house was full of materials on the sofas, on the extra chairs, under the bed, on the top of the cupboard and so on! The Mohan Khokar Dance Collection, including those collected by Ashish, has more than one lakh photographs pertaining to the last one hundred years! From pavement shops in Madras selling second-hand materials he bought many valuable items discarded by the Englishmen at throw-away prices when they left the city for their native land after India's Independence. Think of his purchasing Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's manuscript with the original royal seals of the king imprinted on them with money which he withdrew from his provident fund. He travelled to remote corners of the country to discover Manipuri, Chau, Mohini Attam, etc., unknown to the rest of the country. Based on his field work he published a number of articles and books that are valuable sources of reference to scholars. At a time when photocopying facilities were not available he copied whole books on Indian dances that had been out of print for many years and which are now the only sources available for scholars to study. It is unfortunate that the fantastic collection has no takers from the official agencies in India. Mohan refused to sell them to many bidders from foreign countries as he wanted them to be in India.

"Male dancers in history of Karnataka" by Karuna Vijayendra traces the evolution of dance and male dancers in the State from the ancient times. Satyanarayan Raju, Seshadri Iyengar, Murli Mohan, P Praveen Kumar, Tushar Bhatt, B P Sweekruth and Shridhar Jain recount their introduction to Bharatanatyam and professional experiences. The Editor has promised to feature such talented young dancers (male soloists under 50 with 10 years' experience) from a particular State or region every year.

There is an interesting write-up on the Madras season by S Janaki tracing its evolution through the years to the present day when it is perhaps the world's largest and longest cultural festival.

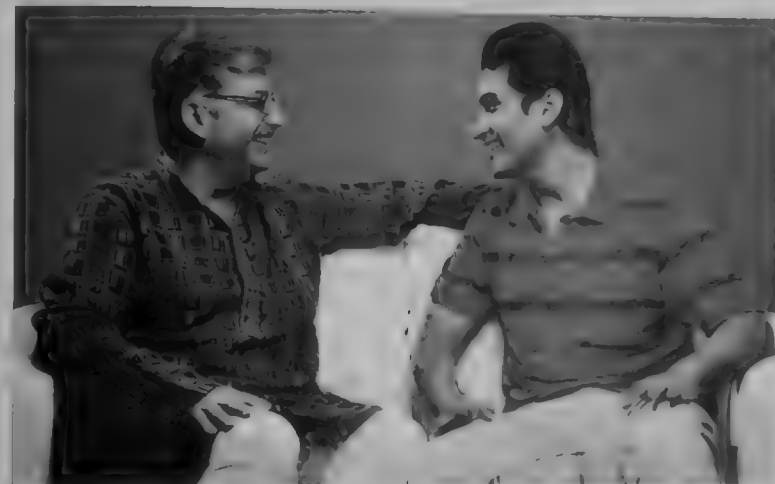
Manasa Joshi, the debutante of 2009, is featured followed by a write-up on Devaniya, a new Kathak school in Chennai. The record of events in the various regions of the country with details of the programmes is then presented. The volume ends with obituaries of artistes, both in India and abroad, who passed away during the year.

The production quality is of a high order with colourful pictures overlaid with texts on some pages. However, there are a few pages like 10 and 11 where the colour combination is such that it is somewhat difficult to read the text. It needs to be kept in view in future issues. The cover has the picture of Ted Shawn as Siva Nataraja. He was the father of modern dance in America. He created and carted a huge metal ring of fire weighing 450 kgs on a ship back to USA in 1928 and stood and danced in it as Nataraja. This picture alone, not seen so far in any other publication by this writer, testifies to the enormous pains taken by the Editor of the Annual to collect rare gems of artefacts in the field of Indian dance. Attendance certainly arrests the attention of the reader from the beginning to the end!

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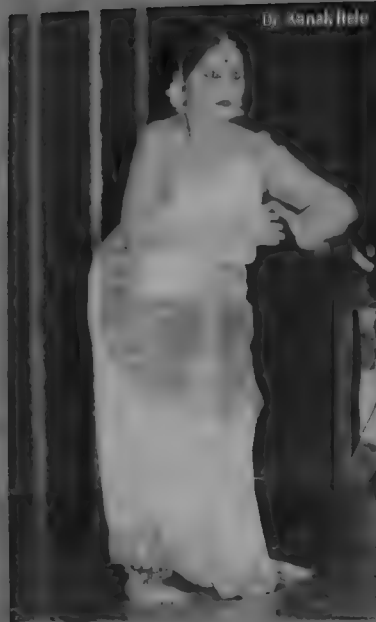
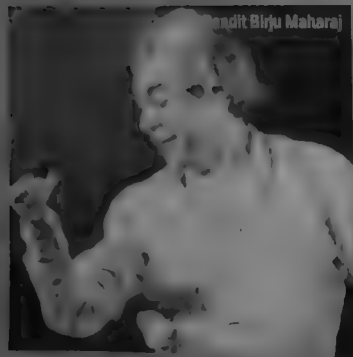
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## 70 Years of Indian Classical Dances

- Jyothi Mohan



Mumbai witnessed the glorious past, vibrant present and the promising future of classical dances, in a national seminar organised by Nalanda Dance Research Centre. The seminar focussed on changes seen in the classical dance scene, post independence. A galaxy of exponents of various styles, presented their views as well as breath-taking performances, regaling the enthusiastic audience over 3 days.

Inaugurating the seminar on Sept.17th 2010, the eminent panellists lit the traditional lamp. Well-known exponent of Mohini Attam, Dr Kanak Rele who is the founder of Nalanda welcomed the audience that consisted of students, dancers, writers and rasikas. She elaborated on the purpose of the seminar. It was to review the trends and changes in the major classical dance forms of the country during the last seventy years. The dance forms examined were Bharata Natyam, Mohini Attam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi and Manipuri. Sri Subhash Chandran's talk that followed, traced the history of classical dances. A very interesting film was the highlight of the evening. Ashish Khokar, a historian, author, photographer, critic and archivist, had put together a very informative film which took us down memory lane. We got to see rare photographs and recordings of famous dancers of yore whom we had only read about. Beginning with a vintage photograph of 'The Tanjore Nautch Party' (1910), we were treated to rare photographs of Ram Gopal (in whose dance pictures we could see a jal tarangam player as accompanying musician), Uday Shankar and others. The Golden Years when Balasaraswati, Kamala and Rukmini Devi added their brilliance to take Bharata Natyam to great

heights were also highlighted. An excerpt from the film, Kalpana (1945), showcasing brilliant synchronization, in group choreography of Uday Shankar, showed that even that long ago, group choreography of a high order was in vogue! The Maharaj family's contribution to Kathak and Birju Maharaj's inimitable Kaun gali gayo Shyam, besides performances of Sitara Devi and Shaswati Sen formed the segment on Kathak. We also got to see the more recent dance exponents like the late Chandralekha, Alamel Valli, Astad Deboo and so on. Films from Nalanda's archives showed excerpts of Kathakali performances of veteran Ramanakutty Nair and Mohini Attam by Kanak Rele. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's masterly rendering of Kuru Yadunandana, made many in the audience nostalgic. Kumkum Mohanty and the entrancing late Sanjukta Panigrahi took us through Odissi at its best. Doyen Vedanta Satyanarayana Sarma in his famous streevesham (Bhama Kalapam) and the famous dancing couple, Raja-Radha Reddy conveyed the spirit of Kuchipudi. The Vazhuvur bani of Bharata Natyam was highlighted with excerpts from performances of legendary Kamala, S.Kanaka and Chitra Visweswaran. Though all belong to the same bani, the difference in presentation showed how the style has changed over time! Guru Bipin Singh and the Jhaveri Sisters put forth the most traditional pieces of Manipuri for the film.

The 1st day thus, gave us a glimpse of the glorious past of our classical dance forms.

**Day 2:** Veteran dancer from Kalakshetra- Prof. Chandrashekar, took the stage by storm. His strict training along with his own devotion, dedication and unwavering

focus has given him the strength and experience to continue to perform with energy and involvement to this day. He reminisced about his days at Kalakshetra under his mentor Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale. He spoke about how, in his time, there were barely 5-6 students in a class which sometimes had 2 teachers! He rued the present situation wherein dance schools have become akin to factories of mass-production.

For his performance, he chose Papanasam Sivan's Nattakurinji varnam-Swami Naan Undan Adimai. The vigour, stamina and skilful delineation belied his 75 years. Right from the opening trikala jati, an elaborate one, he set the tone for his masterly rendering of the popular varnam. The unwavering stances of Lord Nataraja that he depicted brought out goose-bumps. I felt I had a vision of the Lord of Chidambaram Himself. The arresting, dignified portrayal of Lord Shiva brought before our eyes the Lord in all his majesty. Shorn of any unnecessary leaps, contrived posturing or aggressive movements, his portrayal was an inspiration to all lovers of dance. The perfect execution of the jatis drew spontaneous applause from the appreciative rasikas. He mentioned that these days, jatis seem to be getting very long-winded and monotonous to watch. He also felt that mridanga jatis were being increasingly employed instead of the traditional natya jatis. He felt short, crisp jatis with underlying rhythmic complexities were far more interesting. He took our breath away when he performed a very difficult adavu, in which he sat down on the floor, got up and immediately took a swift turn all in a micro second! This is a tall order even for young dancers! He referred to it as a nagabandha adavu. He strongly believes that the varnam sahityam should be elucidated with sancharis that concern the lyrics. Unwarranted digression in the name of sancharis is to be eschewed. He

feels telling stories in varnams should be avoided. He illustrated this effectively by showing his imagination in presenting the sahityam in myriad ways. The way he presented the varnam, showed immense possibilities that existed in our traditional framework. It was indeed an eye-opener for the student community present there. He concluded his presentation with an Ashtapadi tuned in Ahir Bhairav. The 7th Ashtapadi- Mamiyam chalitha vilokya,' which portrays Krishna's sorrow on being separated from Radha, was portrayed by him very effectively. Singer Hariprasad's evocative rendering added to the pathos and brought a lump to the throat. Mention must be made here of the excellent support from the wings. The crisp jathir-rendering by Smt. Jaya Chandrasekhar, the very soulful music of Hariprasad, the mellifluous violin of veteran Sri T. K. Padmanabhan and deft strokes on the mridangam by Adyar Balu, added to this truly wonderful performance. At the end, the packed-to-capacity auditorium rose as one to put their hands together in appreciation of a truly memorable performance.

The pre-luch session saw Kanak Rele explain how she tried to add to the repertoire of Mohini Attam by drawing on mythology as well as by using contemporary themes. The opening dance item on Ganapathy, presented by her disciple Megha Mohad, showcased the choreographic skill of Dr. Rele. A fascinating piece of nritya set in Samantha Malahari raga peculiar to Kerala, was set to an improvised version of the Kerala rhythm panchaari of six beats. Dr. Rele's disciple Madhuri Desmukh danced this very alluringly. 'Oru Makal,' set to Saveri raga, based on an excerpt from the Aham poems, depicted the agony of a mother whose only daughter elopes. Dr. Kanak Rele's lucid abhinaya was very moving. The portrayal of Kubja, the hunchback maid of Kamsa, by Dr. Rele touched a chord. The Oriya

poem was translated by the late Dr. Ayyappa Panicker and set in ragamalika.

The afternoon session was a presentation by Pandit Birju Maharaj. As Panditji was recovering from an eye surgery and a bad back, he asked his prime disciple Shaswati Sen to start the programme with Vallabhacharya's Madhurashtakam. Dressed very simply, with hardly any make-up, Shaswati, with her very eloquent eyes and perfect body language seemed to be Krishna, amidst us. Very subtle abhinaya, but so telling! Soon after, Pandit Birju Maharaj took over. He began, in his customary humourous manner, telling us how his grandfather and father took Kathak to villages and earned a lot of respect as great artistes. He had us in splits when he imitated his portly grandfather. The villagers would look at him sceptically, when told, he would perform for them, given his slightly large, generous frame. Once he danced though, they were left totally surprised and chastened he added! He pointed out that rhythm exists in nature around us. He drew spontaneous applause when he showed how one could connect rhythm syllables to myriad instances of daily life like the gait of animals, birds, conversation between people etc. Games, depicting difficulties, solutions, joy etc. were linked to different rhythms which made it very interesting for the audience. At this juncture, Shaswati related an amusing anecdote. Seeing his students gripped by hockey fervour during the World Cup, he decided to woo them off the television by creating a tihai which contained a stroke, dribble and ended in a victorious goal!!! His extempore demonstration, ready wit and informal tone endeared him to the young audience which clapped enthusiastically throughout his presentation.

**Day 3:** Kumkum Mohanty traced the evolution of Odissi and the role played by her mentor, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Her pallavi and Ashtapadi both had a

touch of class. Though a very senior dancer, she too demonstrated her agility and dexterity through her presentation.

While dancing 'Braj Ku Chora' in Anandabhairavi, from being a tearful baby Krishna on the floor at one point, to an indulgent mother Yashoda the next, she was able to sit and stand with consummate ease. All the 4 items that she performed showed her dedication to the art form and the years of assiduous practice that had gone into it. She seemed to have tremendous stamina too.

Bringing in virility and power was Raja Reddy in his Kuchipudi presentation with wife Radha. Tracing the evolution of Kuchipudi from the natyamelavu and nattuva melamu, Raja and Radha Reddy took us through several interesting tandava-lasya combinations performed with precision and unison. The forceful nritya portions of Raja Reddy were a delight to behold. The dream sequence from Uma Parinayam that followed was very lyrical. The fast-moving Tillana in Natabhairavi was the finale of their presentation.

The Jhaveri Sisters are synonymous with Manipuri. Darshana Jhaveri's description of the finer aspects of Manipuri was exhaustive. The pung chollam by Mangal Singh was greatly appreciated. Darshana, Gnaneshwari Devi and Draupadi Devi elaborated on the nayikas-vipralamba and khandita, indicating that abhinaya in Manipuri was evolving with time. The lasya-tandava depiction in Manipuri was also well-received.

For those who attended it, the seminar was a veritable feast of dance and music at its best. What struck me was, that the performers, though in their sixties or seventies, could easily put today's young dancers to shame! The years of disciplined life and training have stood them in such good stead, that they exhibit the verve, energy and agility of young

children. It was an eye-opener and I felt sad that other students of dance in the city were not present to get inspired by the performances of these stalwarts. Dr. Kanak Rele and her dedicated team have to be complimented for the impeccable arrangements made for the delegates as well as guests. The food was very

enjoyable too. The students present, got an opportunity to interact and learn from these great Gurus. This seminar was indeed memorable in more ways than one and one hopes we have more such opportunities, of watching and imbibing from veterans in the field.

Read

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## Sabha Roundup

### Concert of Suguna Purushothaman and Suguna Varadachari 3rd Oct 2010



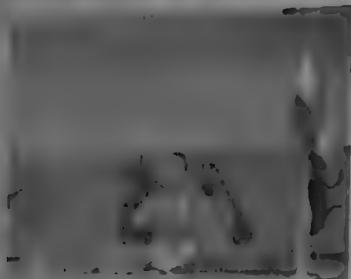
(L to R) J. Vaidyanathan (mridangam),  
Venkatesh Rangachari (morsing),  
Suguna Purushothaman,  
Suguna Varadachari, R. Hemalatha (violin)

The concert featured veteran vocalists and torch-bearers of the Musiri bani - how else would the concert be but steeped in classicism, balance, shorn of anavasyams and immensely satisfying? A pada varnam in Khamas Enta ninne was followed by the bani's specialty Janaki Ramana in Suddha Seemantini with kalpana swaras and excellent kuraippu at mukkal idam at Rakta nalina dala. Suguna Varadachari presented Ramapriya alapana followed by Patnam Subramanya Iyer's kriti Korina vara with neraval and kalpana swaras at Parichara vaanara samoocha. Suguna Purushothaman disclosed to the audience that the next item they presented, N.S. Ramachandran's Shri Chandrashekhara yateendram was the first kriti she learnt from Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. Saveri alapana by Suguna Purushothaman followed with vintage Musiri phrases with nyasam at madhyamam. Shyama Shastri's classic

Durusuga was rendered with aplomb with neraval (also in classic Musiri style) and kalpana swaras at Narayani Shyamakrishna nuta. RTP was the high point and mind-boggling in terms of laya; the raga was Shanmukhapriya with Suguna Varadachari elaborating in the lower sthayis while Suguna Purushothaman took over from the tara shadjam; the pallavi sahitya was Maya vennai unda vaya pannisaitthu varuvaya; the vocalists rendered the pallavi together with Suguna Purushothaman reckoning Tisra Triputa talam in khanda gati (7 x 5=35) and Suguna Varadachari reckoning Tisra Rupaka talam in misra gati (5 x 7=35) with laghu counted before drutam; both of them converged on the arudi. Mridangist J. Vaidyanathan rose to the challenge beautifully. Pallavi was followed by a Tamil adaptation by Suguna Purushothaman, of Parulanna Mata, Verum vambu varthai. A tillana in three ragas (Vasanti, Hamsanandi and Madhuvanti), a composition of Suguna Purushothaman, was the concluding item. Violinist Dr. R. Hemalatha matched the vocalists in virtuosity in every department of manodharma (especially pallavi) and kriti rendering. Mumbai artiste Venkatesh Rangachari provided good support on the morsing, stepping in for Anirudh Atreya who couldn't make it to the concert.

- Nalini Dinesh

## Margam on a Roll!



A unique programme of Bharatanatyam on skates was presented by S. Kasirajan, a 13-year-old teenager from Puducherry, on 11th October 2010, as part of a sabha programme to encourage young talent. What is exceptional about him is that he is not only a good roller-skater and Bharatanatyam dancer individually, but also possesses the rare capability to fuse them and do them together. So far he has presented 75 performances in all major cities of the country. He has secured a number of awards and prizes like the International Nritya Shree Award at the International Dance Festival in Cuttack, Yuva Kala Bharati from Bharathi Yuva Kendra Trust, Madurai, etc. He was selected for the National Child Award for Puducherry and invited to New Delhi to receive a silver medal from the President of India.

This writer looked eagerly to see the programme. Apart from the fact that it was a full-fledged BN performance, it was based on the Margam format in the revival of which he is very much interested. Right from Pushpanjali when he rolled on to the stage to the thunderous applause of an appreciative audience that remained in the auditorium till the end, there was no faltering or slackness or tentativeness in the artiste. The perfect soushtava sthanaka of araimandi was impressive from the very first item. The charis and the eye

movements were precursors to what one was to see later in heavier items. Then came the following songs: Swagatam Krishna – Mohanam, Ananda Tandavam – Shanmukhapriya, Mate Malayadhwaja Pandya Samjate – Daru Varnam – Khamas, Parukkulle Nalla Nadu – Hamsanandi.

The hasta mudras and body lines were clear and correct. Thus "Ananda Tandavam" began with an archetypal sivalinga hasta. The skates did not seem to make much difference as he could effortlessly do anchita padam or kunchita padam and other movements without slipping. In between, he could give a glimpse of a couple of brahmaris and utplavanas to a limited extent. One novelty was that, even as the song was sung, there was a simultaneous rendering of jatis making the item interesting. A few complex and difficult karanas like Lalatilaka were also executed competently receiving the approbation of the rasikas. The Nataraja poses were well done both in this and the subsequent song.

Kasi took about 20 minutes to do the complex daru varnam in Khamas of Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavata on Madurai Meenakshi. Adavus like murukku adavu displayed angasuddha. Both the nritta and nritya were done in a professional manner. Except for the limitation on azhuttam attributable to skates, the whole item was danced in a manner that established his competence. Apart from telling the story of Meenakshi and her conquests, Kasi showed his abhinaya skills in displaying myriad emotions on his face in sancharis. He made full use of the spacious stage.

## Annual Music, Dance & Drama Festival 13th-18th Nov 2010



(L to R) Lavanya Sundararaman, Nityashree Mahadevan, Ananthu

Triveni Sangamam was the name of the orchestral programme featuring Nityashree singing evergreen film hits of MS, MLV and DKP, vocally supported by her niece Lavanya Sundararaman and Ananthu. The list was extensive including songs from MS' Meera, Savitri, MLV's *Adal Kaaneero*, Ayyasamy, DKP's *Aduvome Pallu Paduvome*, *Thayin Manikkodi* etc.



Marathi folk extravaganza

On the second day, a Marathi folk extravaganza by Ashok Hande swept the audience off their feet. It showcased the best of Marathi culture and arts and left many sabha members who hadn't attended the programme regretting their decision after listening to rave reviews from the ones who had.



(L to R) P.S. Phalgun (mrudangam), Rahul (violin), Sriram Parasuram, Anuradha Sriram, Niranjan Lele (harmonium), Suryaksha Deshpande (tabla)

On the third day of the festival, the popular jugalbandhi couple Anuradha Sriram and Sriram Parasuram presented Carnatic and Hindustani interpretations of ragas like Sahana, Mayamalavagowla and Yamunakalyani. The opening item was Sahana Adi tala varnam *Karunimpa* with competent kalpana swaras alternately sung by the duo at the charanam kripa joodumi. The Hindustani equivalent Shahana Kanada sounded quite different from Sahana, it seemed more like the Carnatic Kanada than Sahana. Sriram's comment that Sahana is an offshoot of Shahana Kannada was also quite surprising, since Sahana is a very ancient raga from the age of Tamil pann isai. A detailed alapana of Mayamalavagowla was sung with some beautiful phrases by Anuradha bringing out the raga essence. The Tevaram *Pittha pirai soodi* was presented followed by a composition *Allah* in the Hindustani equivalent Bhairav. Krishna Nee Begane in the Carnatic Yamunakalyani and *Jamuna kinare mora ghara aijaiyo* in the Hindustani Misra Kalyan were presented with ample improvisation. Another sound alapana, this time of Dharmavati prefixed *Bhajana seya*; the Hindustani equivalent was skipped to set up the field for tani in the Sriranjani kriti *Brochevarevare*. The supporting artistes were Rahul on the violin, P.S. Phalgun on the mrudangam, Niranjan Lele on the harmonium and Suryaksha Deshpande on the tabla.





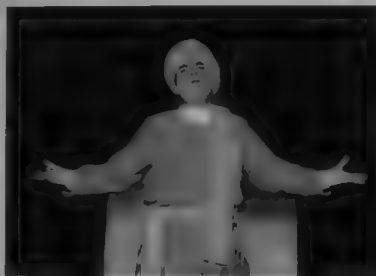
(L to R) Nisha Rajagopal (violin),  
Sikkil Gurucharan, Arjun Kumar (mrudangam)

Kalyani Adi Tala varnam was the warm up for Sikkil Gurucharan who sang on the fourth day of the festival. Why stop at "ni" after singing the charanam (niluparani) though? The "ni" is not deergha since the charanam means "unstoppable (niluparani) illusive desire (mohamaaye)". *Padavini* with kalpanaswaras was followed by an alapana in which Begada seemed to play hide-and-seek. *Kadaikkan vaitthenai* was rendered well with only neraval at *Vandanai Sei Maragatha valliye*. Meesu Krishna Iyer's Ranjani kriti *Parama pavana* was followed by *Simhendramadhyamam* alapana wherein the violinist Nagai Sriram came up with some very poignant phrases. *Rama rama gunaseema* with neraval and swaras at *Munimanasa* and tani avarthanam by Arjun Prakash which had some amazing rhythmic sounds and patterns followed. *Annapoorne* was the filler before pallavi in *Vasanta*, *tisra jampa*, mukkall eduppu, *Katharul Madhavan maruga un manam irangi mayiludan*. Ragamalika swaras in *Bhairavi*, *Vasantabhairavi* and *Kalyanavasantam* were like the swirling colours in a kaleidoscope. A *viruttam Alamaramamarathin Ilai* mel was a prelude to *Momujoopura Krishna* before a brisk *Hamsanandi tillana* to end the concert.



Hema Malini

Hema Malini's dance ballet *Meera* had good performances by her troupe and excellent singing by Kavita Krishnamurthy.



Shekhar Sen In and as Vivekananda

Shekhar Sen's monoact *Vivekananda* was outstanding. He enacted the life history of Swami Vivekananda with very convincing portrayals of various characters like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sharada Devi, his disciples and many others, using Hindi, English and some Bengali too. Shekhar's melodious singing was a highlight of the performance and was of professional standards. His dialogue delivery was clear and even his female voice production was authentic.

## Concert of Nisha Rajagopalan 4th Dec 2010



(L to R) Trivandrum Balaji (mrudangam),  
Nisha Rajagopal, V.V.S. Murari (violin)

Nisha gave a well-planned recital, perfectly aligned to shruti, with solid raga alapanas containing stately karvais and requisite ravai sangatis. Ranjani alapana prefixed a new and attractive kriti of Yoganarasimhan *Sada saranga nayane* with kalpana swaras. A well-rendered *Shyama Shastri kriti Kanaka shaila vihara* in *Punnagavarali* was followed by a sprightly *Papanasam Sivan kriti Kumaran tal* in *Yadukula Kambhoji*. The main raga was *Bhairavi* with a detailed and involved alapana for the *Dikshitar kriti Balagopala*. In her neraval at *Neela neerada shareera*, it was mystifying why she kept giving long karvais at *shareera*, which was not prefixed with *neela neerada* too, and hardly ever sang *dheerataru*. There was also some back-and-forth on neraval speeds. A systematic neraval would have completed the otherwise good listening experience. V.V.S. Murari and Trivandrum Balaji accompanied Nisha on the violin and mrudangam.

## Concert of Manasi Prasad 5th Dec 2010

It was an evening when shruti was proving to be elusive to Manasi and increasingly so as the evening progressed. Maybe given the circumstances, she could have lessened her problems by opting for a less-challenging RTP than the *Sriranjani*-

*Janaranjani*-*Ranjani* suite that she chose to go ahead with. Treatment of *Janaranjani* was quite perfunctory. Strangely the shruti problem seemed to be aggravated with certain swaras in every raga she sang, *gandharam* in *Todi*, *daivatam* in *Ranjani* and so on. It is to her credit that she strove to maintain her involvement despite the setbacks. While the *Todi kriti* was *Kaddanuvuriki* with *neraval* at *niddura nirakarinchu*, the *pratimadhyama raga* chosen was *Poorvikalyani* for *Neelakanta Sivan's kriti Anandanatamaduvu*. There was a long post-pallavi segment consisting of the *Sayankale viruttam*, *abhang*, *tarangam*, *bhajan* and *tillana*. The support of *Nalina Mohan* (with sound alapanas on the violin) and *mrudangist C. Seluvaraju* redeemed the concert to a certain degree.

- Nalini Dinesh

## Rajarajeswaram 1000

Right from the time ABHAI announced their special program 'Rajarajeswaram 1000' featuring 1000 dancers at the *Brihadeeswara Temple* in *Thanjavur* on 25th September 2010, there was excitement in the air. The purpose was to create awareness among dancers about the connection between the temple and the dancers in olden times. Dancers from all over the world came enthusiastically to *Thanjavur* to pay obeisance to *Lord Brihadeeswara* and to show their gratitude to the great king *Raja Raja Chola*, a great patron of arts, on the completion of 1000 years of the *Brihadeeswara temple*. The 1000 dancers led by *Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam* danced on the *medai* (platform) around the *Nandi* in perfect unison to the delight of the thousands of spectators who had gathered in *Thanjavur* for this ethereal experience. The perfect coordination and synchronisation by such a large number



of dancers was made possible by providing DVDs with the choreography, to all participating gurus and their shishyas. Credit for this wonderful effort goes to Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam and her dedicated team as well as to the Tamilnadu Government.

The Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts & Sangeetha Sabha, decided to recreate that magic by bringing the fifty-odd dancers from Mumbai who were part of the mega event at Thanjavur, together, onto the famed Shanmukhananda stage. The Chandrasekharendra Saraswati auditorium was packed with excited members, gurus and connoisseurs. The first copy of the DVD containing excerpts from the historic occasion of the 25th of September 2010 was released on the occasion. It was handed over by Dr. Jayashree Rajagopalan to Guru Rajee Narayan, on behalf of Swati Solutions and ABHAI. Commemorative coins issued by the Tamilnadu Government were distributed to all the participants from Maharashtra on this occasion. The programme started off with the Chitra Poorvaranga, a ritual described in the Natyashastra, to sanctify the stage before a performance. The Sutradhar brought the jarjara and offered pooja to the four corners of the stage. The programme for the evening was outlined in a novel manner, with natis or dancers asking questions and the sutradhar explaining

the theme. The script for this engaging dialogue was penned and narrated lucidly by Smt. Santosh Rajan. This was followed by a screening of excerpts from the documentary on the Karanas engraved in the temple. This is significant as it is evident that the karanas were codified for the first time, in a serial order. The artistes of Nrityodaya, Mumbai presented the 108 karanas set to a Lakshana Geetham on karanas composed by Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam. While the stage was being prepared for the 50 dancers, snippets of the dance of 25th September as well as the experiences of senior dancers from Chennai who had participated in the mega event were screened. When the curtain opened, it was a colourful and impressive picture as every square inch of the massive Shanmukhananda stage was occupied by the dancers! The order of the items remained the same as on Sept. 25th. Ganesa Kavutvam, followed by the ten verses from Karuvur Devar's Tiruvisaippa and the Siva Panchakshara Stotram of Adi Sankara that Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam had choreographed and composed specially for the occasion. The only change that was brought about was that each row of artistes presented an item before moving to the back so that another group could come ahead and face the audience. The Mumbai effort was lauded by not only the delighted

audience but also by the luminaries in the field who were present on the occasion. Guru Kalyanasundaram paid kudos to Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam for conceiving the project and executing it with such success. He congratulated the participants for the unity in diversity. He was impressed that gurus from diverse styles had joined hands, burying the differences in style and dancing in one bani-that of Lord Nataraja, in total unison. He commended the support provided by Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha for this noble cause. Noted Manipuri exponent Darshana Jhaveri complimented Dr. Jayashree Rajagopalan for bringing the concept of Rajarajeswaram 1000 to the Mumbai

audience. She also complimented the dancers for coming together to celebrate the cause of dance.

In the history of dance, the Thanjavur temple is significant not only because of the karana sculptures but also because the largest inscription in the temple is entirely dedicated to the performing artists. The inscription lists the names and titles of 400 dancers and 240 musicians who resided in the temple premises. The Tamilnadu Government is contemplating on inscribing the names alongside, of the 1000 dancers who participated in the historic event. This is the dream that our dancers hope will come true for they will be on record for posterity.

- Jyothi Mohan

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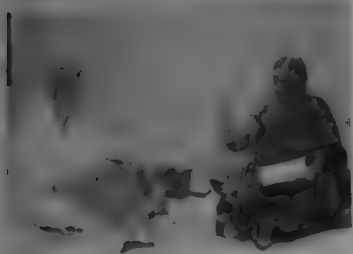
### Errata

In the Sabha Roundup report in Shanmukha July-September 2010 issue, the reviewer made a technical error in stating that Bombay Jayashree Ramnath had made a sahitya lapse in singing "sadrusha netram" in Shree Venkata Gireesham as "shatru netram". The correct sahityam as composed by Muthuswamy Dikshitar is indeed "shatru netram". The error is regretted.

## Happenings in the Vidyalyaya

- Nalini Dinesh

### Lecture Demonstration on Pallavi Singing 6th October 2010



(L to R) Rohit Prasad (Mrudangam),  
Suguna Purushothaman

Smt. Suguna Purushothaman, senior disciple of late Shri Musiri Subramanya Iyer and an expert in rendering ragam, tanam and pallavi gave a lecture demonstration on pallavi singing. Rohit Prasad provided mridangam support. The lecture demonstration was effective for the simple reason that it brought out vividly the beauty of the art of pallavi singing. Many a time when one hears RTP renditions in concerts, it seems like a mechanical affair, wherein the musician just seems to bite and chew one single line in different ways and varying speeds, so much so that one wonders why this exercise is needed at all, especially after a heavy alapana-kriti-neraval-kalpana swara suite – though some singers do try to relieve the monotony with a breezy filler kriti before launching into the RTP. Smt. Suguna's demonstration of different pallavis, were full of raga bhava, unhurried and creative. The pallavis she chose to demonstrate were mostly traditional ones that have stood the test of time.

She started by outlining the preparation needed for a student before he/she can

attempt a ragam, tanam and pallavi. The preparation would consist of akaara singing of sarali, jantai and alankara exercises in three speeds, five gatis (tisram, chatusram, khandam, misram and sankeernam) and offbeat too (at  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{3}{4}$  eduppu). Along with this practice, the student would need to learn a number of kritis (and varnams too) in a single raga and also listen to senior artistes' renditions of the raga, to be able to sing alapana or taanam in that raga.

Smt. Suguna then explained the standard format of pallavi rendition; pallavi to be sung twice, then neraval in three speeds (wherein one should take care not to shift the lyrics from the original placement), anulomam (singing pallavi in three speeds keeping talam constant), tisram (each count of the talam is changed to 3 aksharas), pratilomam (the talam speed is changed) and finally kalpana swaras (could be in ragamalika too) in two speeds, not only to the starting eduppu but also to the arudi and other appropriate places. Talamalika and ragamalika pallavis, pallavis employing different yatis like damaru, shrotovaha etc (called chitra pallavis), panchanadai pallavis, pallavis in the 108 talas etc were popular in olden times.

Smt. Suguna's tanam demonstration was an eye-opener, she employed vallinam-mellinam (stressed and unstressed) in her voice production, brigas, sphuritam, different combinations of swaras in different gatis, small alapana phrases etc to produce a listening experience distinct from that of raga alapana. She emphasized on aesthetics in everything, including selection of phrases in tanam, selection of lyrics in the pallavi, distribution of the syllables of the lyrics across the talam, selection of arudi position etc.

Smt. Suguna demonstrated pallavis of different talams and gatis and one from the 108 tala-system too namely, Lakshmeesham. Some pallavis of special interest that were demonstrated:

1. *Kadaikkannai vaithennai aalamma karunakari Sankari Gowri* – Bhairavi, tisra jampa, misra gati, eduppu after 2 in starting beat, arudi karvai-8 aksharas.
2. *Venu gana lolanai kana kannayiram vendum* – Kedaragowla, tisra roopakam, sankeerna gati, eduppu after 6 aksharas in the first beat of laghu and arudi karvai – 7 aksharas.
3. *Govindanadi Mukundanadi enakkavar sondamadi* – Todi, Roopakam, eduppu after 1 aksharam of veechu, arudi in "di" of Mukundanadi, uttarangam begins at  $\frac{3}{4}$  edam in veechu.
4. *Simhendra madhyama sthite Lalite Balachandra dhara hite sada namaste Giri sute* – Simhendramadhyamam, tisra ata, misra gati, eduppu atheetham after 5 in last veechu, arudi karvai-6 aksharas.

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### Saraswati Pooja 16th Oct 2010 & Vidyarambham 17th Oct 2010

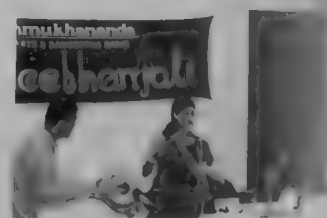
Saraswati pooja was celebrated at the Vidyalyaya with a pooja, followed by a recital of Navavarana kritis of Oothukadu Venkatasubbier by Prema Krishnan, Bhavani Srinivasan, Sugandha Athreya, Bharathi Nagaraj, Sidhi Krishnamoorthy and Mahathi Nagaraj, all disciples of Smt. Kalyani Sharma. Vanamala Dixit and C. Prasanna Kumar accompanied the group on the violin and mridangam respectively. The group began with the invocation to Ganesha in Shanmukhapriya raga *Shree Ganeshwara* and the dhyana kriti in Kalyani *Vaanchasi Yadi Kushalam*, followed by the aavarana kritis; *Santatam*

*Aham Seve* in Bilahari (Trailokya Mohana chakram), *Bhajasva Shree Tripurasundari* in Naadanaamakriyaa (Sarvaashaa paripooraka chakram), *Sarvajeeva Dayakari* in Shuddha Saaveri (Sarvasamkshobhana chakram), *Yoga Yogeshwari* in Ananda Bhairavi (Sarva Sowbhaagyadaayaka chakram), *Neela Lohita Ramani* in Balahamsa (Sarvarthasadhaka chakram), *Sadanandamayi* in Hindolam (Sarvarakshaka chakram), *Sakala loka Nayike* in Arabhi (Sarvarogahara chakram), *Shankari Shree Rajarajeshwari* in Madhyamavati (Sarvasiddhipradayaka chakram) and *Natajana Kalpavalli* in Punnavagavali (Sarvanandamaya chakram). Phalashrut *Haladharanujam* was rendered in Manirangu raga.

Admission of new students and teaching new lessons for students was a part of Vidyarambham on 17<sup>th</sup> Oct 2010

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### Vaggeyakara Day Celebrations Muthuswamy Dikshitar Da 20th Nov 2010



(L to R) Rohit Prasad (mridangam),  
Rasika Chandrashekar (flute),  
Tejasvi Sundararajan (violin)

Rasika Chandrashekar's excellent kriti pathantaram and mellifluous playing made for a successful flute recital. Beginning with the Nattai kriti *Swaminatha Paripalaya* and the vaara kriti of the day *Divakara Tanujam*, she sang the first few lines of the

Neelotpalamba kriti in Mayamalavagowla with panache before rendering it on flute. A brief alapana of Dharmavati, kriti Perandhamavati and the Manirangu kriti Mamava Pattabhirama brought the recital to a close.

Jyotsana Sivakumar sang 2 rupaka tala kritis with same eduppu at the outset - Vallabha Nayakasya in Begada (with brief alapana) and Sarawati Vidhiyuvati in Hindolam. Two raga mudra kritis followed; Chidambara Natarajam (Kedareshwaram for Kedaram raga) and Anandamritakarshini (Amritavarshini). Shri Venkatagireesham in Surutti and a Todi kriti popularized by D.K. Pattammal and D.K. Jayaraman Shri Subrahmanyomaam rakshatu were rendered. A lot of chaturuti rishabham was heard in Jyotsana's Todi kriti rendition.

Sirisha Saketh played some popular kritis of Dikshitar on the veena; Gananayakam (Rudrapriya), Renukadevi (Kannada Bangala), Sarasijanabha sodari (Nagagandhari), Bhajare Re Chitta (Kalyani) and Thyagarajaya Namaste (Begada). She played Begada tanam; the grg gmg phrase sounded a lot like Shankarabharanam. Sirisha also briefly elaborated Kalyani raga.

Violinist Tejasvi Sundararajan and mrudangist Rohit Prasad accompanied the main performers.

The programme was compered by Shridevi Keshavan.



### S. Seshadri Memorial Talent Exposure Concert 26th Nov. 2010

Subhiksha Mukuntharaj, who has completed the seven year course at the Vidyalaya, had some nice surprises in store for the listeners, her pleasing gamakas for one, an expansive neraval which one wouldn't expect at her level for

another and sangatis in her raga alapanas that seemed spontaneous. Where she fell short were her rendition of compositions especially Veenai Kuppayai's Mohanam Ata Tala varnam which she began with. Most sdp phrases were heard as sndp and pgr as pmgr. Meesu Krishnaiyar's Nattai kriti Vaarananaana and Dikshitar's Lalitha kriti Hiranmayeem followed. Kakali nishadam was not in place in Nattai. Simhendramadhyamam alapana was followed by the Swati Tirunal kriti Rama Rama Gunaseema with neraval and kalpana swaram and kuraippu at Munimanasa dhama. Subhiksha concluded with Ambujam Krishna's Om Namō Narayanaya in Karnarajani and a Sai bhajan. Sustained akaara sadhakam to make the voice pliable and, regular, focused listening to concerts and recordings to develop swara gnanam and further develop her feel for raga bhava are the need of the hour.

It was a day for rare varnams and Kanakavalli Santhanam also presented a lilting Poorvikalyani Adi tala varnam of Harikesanallur Muthaiah Bhagavatar preceded by a brief sketch of the raga. A good Hamsadhwani raga alapana was followed by a kriti Abheeshtha Varada which had the words Sadguru Thyagaraja appearing in it. Kalpana swaras were sung at the pallavi. Thyagaraja's Sriranjani kriti Brochevarevare was followed by Shankarabharanam alapana and Akshayalingavibho with neraval, kalpana swaras and kuraippu at badarivana moola. Tejasvi played a good Shankarabharanam. Kanakavalli's raga renditions sounded rather flat. More gamakas and raga bhava would enhance the appeal. Her rendition of the popular Kapi javali Parulanna Maata was disappointing.

Tejasvi Sundararajan accompanied the vocalists on the violin and Sudarshan Swaminathan provided mrudangam support. Jyothi Mohan compered the programme.

### Mahakavi Subramanya Bharatiyar Day 11th December 2010



(L to R) C.S. Gopakumar (mrudangam),  
Vanamala Dixit (violin), Sidhi Krishnamoorthy,  
Sunita Ganesh, Hemamalini Arunkumar,  
Anuradha Shrivatsa (veena)

Vidushi Kalyani Sharma's students Sidhi Krishnamoorthy, Hemamalini Arunkumar and Sunita Ganesh presented two compositions of Bharatiyar (both part of his series of Thottira paadalgal) beautifully tuned in ghana and rakti ragas by Kalyani Sharma, apart from another popular one of the bard of Ettayapuram.

The first composition was Veerattiruvizhi, part of his Murugan Paattu set in a ghanaragamalika pada varnam format. The rendition sustained the interest of the audience due to the good variety of instrumental and vocal parts as well as musical forms used such as viruttam, alapana, tanam and chittaiswaram, apart from sahiyam. For instance, to begin with, Anuradha Shrivatsa played Nattai tanam on the veena. Hemamalini then sang a viruttam Muruga muruga varuvai followed by Vanamala's Nattai alapana on the violin before the vocalists started singing the pallavi. After the last chittaiswaram in Shree ragam, the group sang the swaras backwards - Varaali, Arabhi, Gowla and Nattai, which created a nice effect.

The second composition Shakti Perum Paavanar is part of Vinayakar Naanmani Maalai. The poet prays to Vinayaka to protect the words of poets. Sunita sang a

viruttam in Hamsadhwani Enakku venum varangalai as a prelude to the actual composition which started with Hamsadhwani, followed by Hamsanandi, Keeravani, Valaji, Hamsanadam, Madhyamavati and Shriranjani. It looked like the group reversed the last two ragas by mistake, but the happy effect of this was, the rendition ended with apt lyrics jayakkodi naatrалаam! The last line of each part of the rendition, each a fervent prayer, was repeated thrice which added good emphasis to the rendition, a la Shyama Shastri composition.

Sentamizh Naadennum podinile in Misra Anandabhairavi was rendered well by the three vocalists who sang a stanza each. C.S. Gopakumar provided good mrudangam support while Sidhi Krishnamoorthy provided introductions for each song. Praveena Gauthaman anchored the function.



# Sri Shanmukhananda Kanchi Mahaswami Sangeetha Sangrahaalay

## Summary of Archives August 2010

### Summary of Audios

	Carnatic	Hindustani	Total
Concerts	11,969	1,632	<b>13,601</b>
Duration	26,814 hours	3,450 hours	<b>30,264 hours</b>
Tracks	99,244	10,288	<b>1,09,532</b>
Size	1,511.2 GB	194.2 GB	<b>1,705.4 GB</b>
Classifications	345	323	<b>668</b>
Main Artists Covered	1,045 Artists	335 Artists	<b>1,380 Artists</b>
Accompanists Covered	1,182 Artists	116 Artists	<b>1,298 Artists</b>
Venues / Sabhas Covered	356	41	<b>397</b>
Cities Covered	189	43	<b>232</b>
Years Covered	1928 to 2010	1935 to 2009	1928 to 2010
Tracks Format	MP3 44.1 Khz 128KBPS Stereo 16 bit		
Tag	ID3 Tag Version 1.1 and Version 2.2		

### Summary of Audios

Classification	Videos	Tracks	Size
Carnatic	1,328	2,439	<b>829.3G</b>
Hindustani	241	394	<b>124.7G</b>
Devotional	1,334	1,677	<b>433.3G</b>
Dance	209	397	<b>118.8G</b>
All	3,112	4,907	<b>1506.3G</b>

### Total Size of Archives

Carnatic Archives (Audio)	1,511.2 GB *
Hindustani Archives (Audio)	194.2 GB *
Videos - All	1,506.3 GB *
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,211.7 GB *</b>



**SRI SHANMUKHANANDA  
FINE ARTS & SANGEETHA SABHA [Regd.]**

Plot No.292, Comrade Harbanslal Marg, Sion (East), Mumbai 400 022  
Phone: 91-22-2407 8888 • Fax: 91-22-2409 2211  
E-mail: shanmugananda@hotmail.com • Website www.shanmukhananda.org.in

## Subscription to 'Shanmukha' An Appeal

Members are aware of the publication of 'Shanmukha', the professional quarterly of the Sabha. It has completed 35 years of existence.

The publication has a high standing among the professionals and aficionados of music, dance and theatre and adds prestige to the Sabha's image. It is one of the few music sabhas in the country that bring out their own professional magazines. The contributions are from experts in their fields. There are reports on the activities of the Sabha. Sometimes it carries valuable articles from other professional magazines and from its own issues of the distant past that are not accessible to the readers otherwise. What is more, there are instances of the articles of 'Shanmukha' being reproduced elsewhere with the Editor's concurrence. The attachment on the contents of the last two issues of the magazine may be seen in this connection.

The subscription for the magazine has not been raised for many years despite increase in the cost of printing. It is now decided to raise the prices as per rates given below:

Sr. No.	Particulars	Present	New Rates
1.	Annual Subscription for 4 Issues	₹ 40/-	₹ 80/-
2.	Price per current issue	₹ 10/-	₹ 20/-
3.	Price per back issue	₹ 5/-	₹ 10/-

The Sabha makes an earnest appeal to those members who are not subscribers to take out annual subscriptions. Members may also consider canvassing for subscriptions with friends and relatives here and in other places. The new rates will be applicable from April - June 2010 issue.

It has also been decided to terminate the life subscription of ₹ 500/- with immediate effect. While the Sabha would continue to honour its commitment to continue to supply the magazine without any interruption, it makes a special appeal to life subscribers to help by making one time donation of say ₹ 1000/- that will be appreciated very much as it will add to the corpus of funds of 'Shanmukha'. Of course, larger or even smaller amounts are welcome.

Members of the Sabha are also requested to consider procuring advertisements from banks and business houses that earmark considerable funds for publicity through various media.

- Encl: 1. Application for subscription  
2. Tariff for advertisement

Advertisement Tariff for Shanmukha from October 1, 2010		MECHANICAL DATA
Four Issues (Annual Contract)		Overall Page Size : 17.28 cm x 24.13 cm
Amount in Rupees		Print Area : 12.70 cm x 20.32 cm
Inside full page	10,000	Screen Ruling : 133" lpi
Inside front cover (full page)	20,000	
Inside back cover (full page)	20,000	
Outside back cover (full page)	25,000	File format CDR/AI/EPS/PDF





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## Subscription for Shanmukha

The Editor  
Shanmukha  
Bharatiya Complex, Opposite Shalini Bhavan  
Bhaudaji Road Extension  
Sion (West), Mumbai 400022, India

Editor: Mrs Radha Namboodiri  
E-mail: bhamusic22@gmail.com  
Tel: (91) (22) 2401 3207

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Sir/Madam,

Please enroll me as a subscriber for Shanmukha for one year with effect from the issue of January/April/July/October \_\_\_\_\_ @ I am remitting an amount of Rs 80/ US\$ 45/ ₹ 2025 towards the subscription through a cheque payable at par in Mumbai/Demand Draft/NEFT/SWIFT/NRI Rupee Account\*. I understand that the receipt of the payment will be acknowledged by e-mail and official receipt sent along with the next issue.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Country: \_\_\_\_\_

Te. No. ( ) ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Mobile: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Membership No (for renewal): \_\_\_\_\_ Yours faithfully

Enclosure, if any: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

@ Mention year. Annual subscription for four issues is ₹80 / US \$ 45 or ₹2025 (for foreign subscribers), including postage.

\* Please give the name of the beneficiary as (Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha).

### DOMESTIC

For NEFT transaction

Bank Name : Indian Bank  
Bank Branch : King's Circle, Mumbai, India  
Account Name : Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha

Account No : SB A/C 402617518  
IFSC No : IDIB000K038

National Electronic Funds Transfer (NEFT) is done at ₹ 5/- payable by the remitter.

### FOREIGN

SWIFT Code: IDIBINBBMAS for dollar payment.  
Other details (except IFSC No.) are the same as for domestic subscriptions. The bank should be instructed that the charges will be borne by the Sabha. If, however, the bank levies them on the remitter, the subscription (Rs 2025) can be made from the non-resident rupee account for which the payment instructions are the same as for domestic remittances.



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**SRI SHANMUKHANANDA  
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**SANGEETHA VIDYALAYA & MAGAZINE COMMITTEE [2010-2011]**

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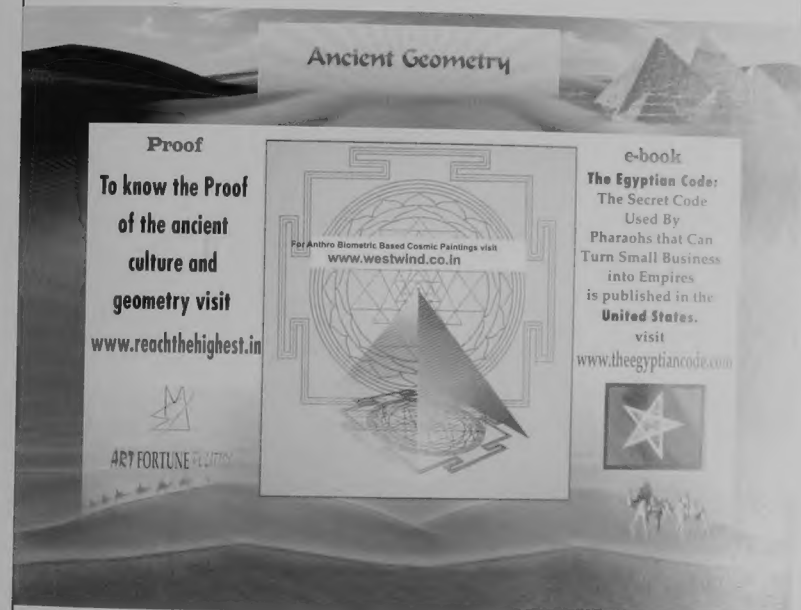
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**THE HINDUSTAN TIMES**  
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